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1938

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MAGAZINE



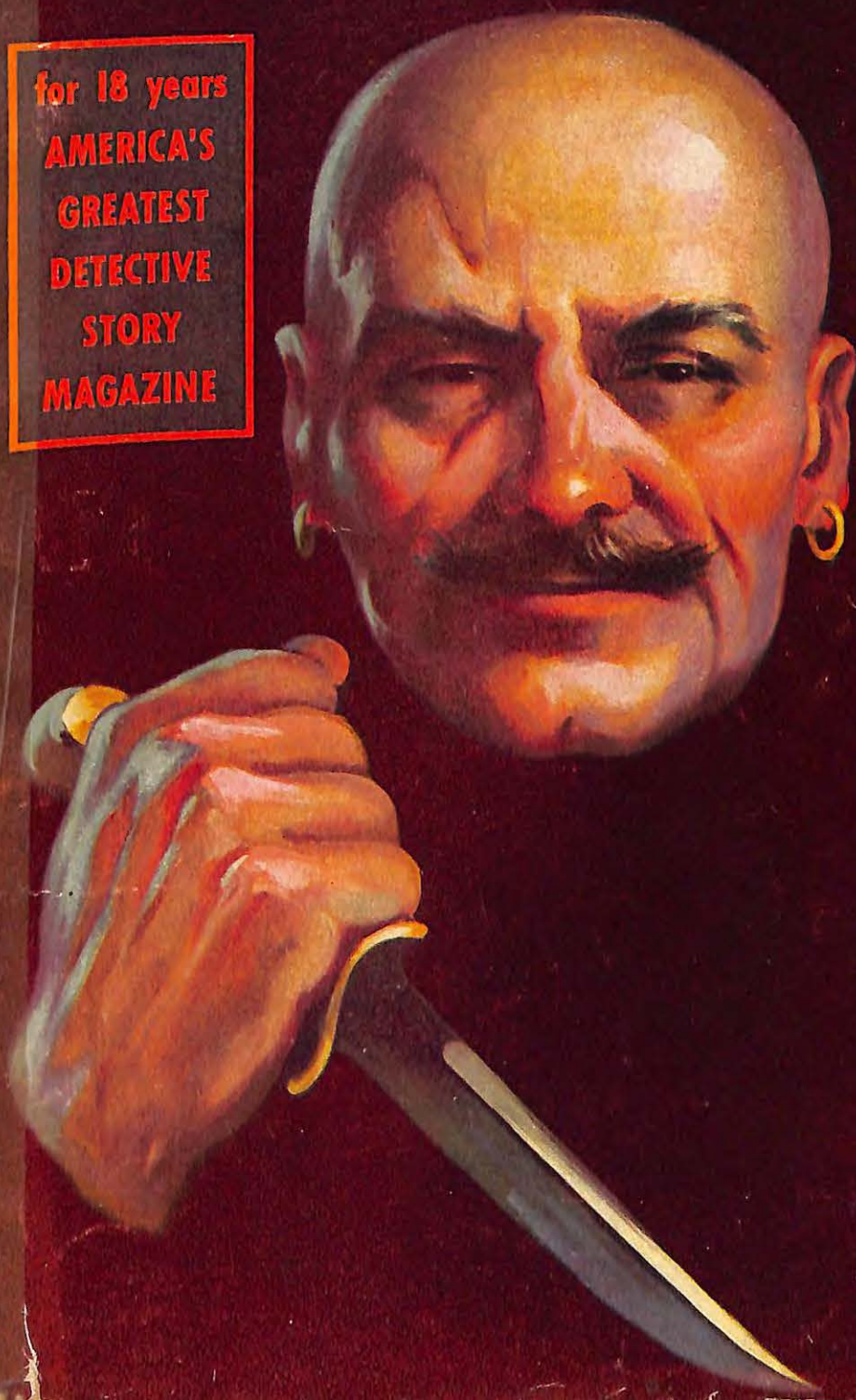
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CAVE

NOVEMBER
1938



Thousands turn to Listerine as science proves it CURES DANDRUFF

*Clinical evidence that Listerine Antiseptic kills queer *Pityrosporum ovale* germ, that causes dandruff, starts wave of home treatments . . . letters pour in telling of rapid, complete cures*

Ever since the amazing dandruff cures accomplished with Listerine became a matter of clinical record, thousands of dandruff sufferers throughout the country have swung over to Listerine for quick, effective relief. Many of them write to us, fervently praising Listerine for what it has done for them.

Here are a few random excerpts from the hundreds of grateful letters that reach us:

"Have been using Listerine for only two weeks. Already feel wonderfully relieved from the horrible itchy feeling."

"Two weeks after first using it my dandruff was gone."

"Tried Listerine for 21 days and can find no trace of dandruff now."

"Tried everything possible, until one day I used Listerine. The itching stopped at once. My hair has stopped falling out."



Kills the Germ

In the sensational research that established the *Pityrosporum ovale* germ as the cause of dandruff, it was positively proved that Listerine kills the germ.

When a mid-western skin clinic instructed dandruff patients to use the daily Listerine Treatment, a substantial number obtained marked relief within

the first two weeks on the average.

76% of a group of dandruff sufferers at a New Jersey Clinic, who used the Listerine treatment twice daily, showed complete disappearance of, or marked improvement in, the symptoms within thirty days.

Start Treatment Today

Don't waste time on ordinary remedies that merely wash away dandruff symptoms temporarily. Start ridding your scalp of the dandruff germ with Listerine today.

And remember, like any other germ disease, dandruff is a stubborn malady requiring persistent treatment. Even after it has been cured, it is wise to guard against re-infection by occasional Listerine Antiseptic massages at regular intervals.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY, St. Louis, Mo.

Cut this out

THE TREATMENT

Once or twice a day, use full strength Listerine on the scalp, spreading it with fingers, or parting the hair and applying with cotton or eye dropper.

Now massage scalp vigorously and persistently with fingertips; active stimulation of the scalp is highly important in dandruff treatment.

If scalp is excessively dry, use a little olive oil in conjunction with Listerine. Listerine will not bleach the hair.



P. S. Listerine, which has been discovered to be such an excellent germicidal treatment for dandruff, is the same Listerine Antiseptic which has been used as a mouth wash and gargle for years.

LISTERINE the PROVED treatment for DANDRUFF



IT IS WONDERFUL HOW LISTERINE STOPS THAT AWFUL SCALING, ITCHING AND BURNING

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY—I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.

IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?

TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.

BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT

TOM'S RIGHT—AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE, I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES

TRAINING FOR RADIO IS EASY AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST—

SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS—OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS—OR IN A BROADCASTING STATION

THERE'S NO END TO THE GOOD JOBS FOR THE TRAINED RADIO MAN

YOU SURE KNOW RADIO—MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER

THAT'S \$15 I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME

THANKS!

I HAVE A GOOD FULL TIME RADIO JOB NOW—AND A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO

OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many \$200 to \$500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to \$6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—\$200 to \$500—for hundreds, while learning. I send you special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time jobs after graduation.

Find Out What Radio Offers You
Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 18 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television. Tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8MM
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home to become Radio Experts. (Please write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

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Broadcast Operator After Twenty Lessons

\$10 to \$25 a Week in Spare Time

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BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF GRIPPING, SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

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F. ELLSWORTH, Editor

J. B. MAGILL, Managing Editor

VOL. XXI No. 8

November, 1938

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IN DECEMBER

"CARELESS KILLER"
A FAST NOVELETTE WITH STAYING POWER

By DWIGHT V. BABCOCK

P. C. CODY, President and Circulation Director

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28x4-36	19	30x3-31	18
28x4-34	18	30x3-29	17
28x4-32	17	30x3-27	16
28x4-30	16	30x3-25	15
28x4-28	15	30x3-23	14
28x4-26	14	30x3-21	13
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28x4-10	6	30x3-5	5
28x4-8	5	30x3-3	4
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30x4-34	18	30x4-32	17
30x4-32	17	30x4-30	16
30x4-30	16	30x4-28	15
30x4-28	15	30x4-26	14
30x4-26	14	30x4-24	13
30x4-24	13	30x4-22	12
30x4-22	12	30x4-20	11
30x4-20	11	30x4-18	10
30x4-18	10	30x4-16	9
30x4-16	9	30x4-14	8
30x4-14	8	30x4-12	7
30x4-12	7	30x4-10	6
30x4-10	6	30x4-8	5
30x4-8	5	30x4-6	4
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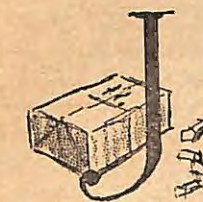
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TICK, TOCK

By **DONALD
WANDREI**



JUD KERRUN
wrapped the box
carefully with paper
cut from a grocer's
brown sack and tied
it with ordinary
white string. He
took a stencil from the top of the work

**A time bomb passes from hand to
hand—with sheer horror at its
explosive end**

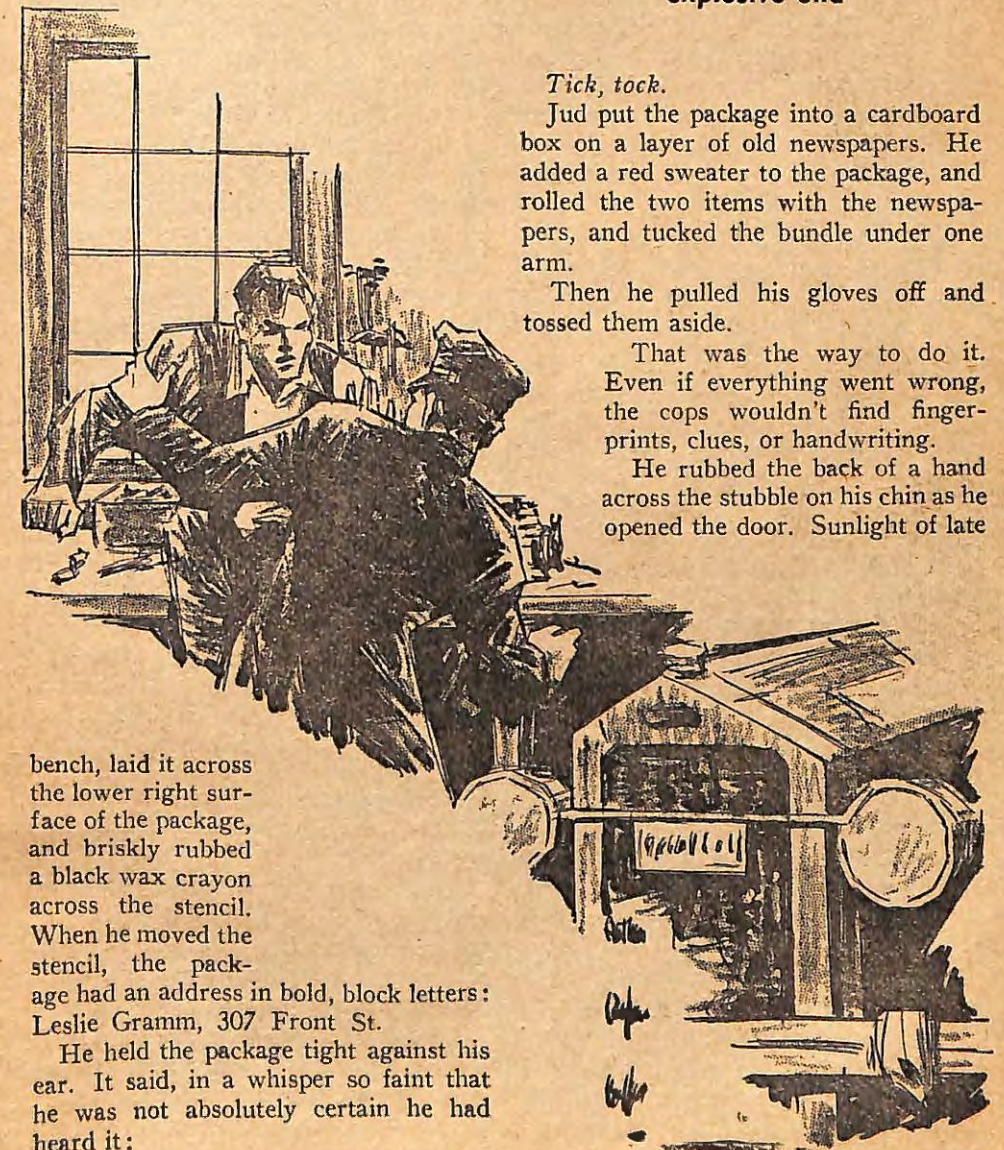
Tick, tock.

Jud put the package into a cardboard
box on a layer of old newspapers. He
added a red sweater to the package, and
rolled the two items with the newspa-
pers, and tucked the bundle under one
arm.

Then he pulled his gloves off and
tossed them aside.

That was the way to do it.
Even if everything went wrong,
the cops wouldn't find finger-
prints, clues, or handwriting.

He rubbed the back of a hand
across the stubble on his chin as he
opened the door. Sunlight of late



bench, laid it across
the lower right sur-
face of the package,
and briskly rubbed
a black wax crayon
across the stencil.
When he moved the
stencil, the pack-
age had an address in bold, block letters:
Leslie Gramm, 307 Front St.

He held the package tight against his
ear. It said, in a whisper so faint that
he was not absolutely certain he had
heard it:

afternoon slanted briefly inside the combination workshop and garage. The light touched on a battered six-year old machine and the work bench beside it, its top littered with pieces of wire, lengths of metal, and a few spilled flakes of black powder. All that stuff could be cleaned up later. Time counted, now. Time was saying:

Tick, tock.

Jud closed and locked the door as he went out. He squinted his eyes till they became used to the sun. He rubbed his chin again, nervously, with the back of his clenched fist. Then he looked at the fist and scowled. He let his arm hang loose as he walked around the side of a two-story frame house badly in need of paint.

A caterpillar was crawling at the edge of the grass beside the path. Jud went three steps out of his way to mash it.

He angled back to the path again with a loose, shambling gait. His shoulders slouched. His whole body had a kind of slouch. Even his soiled brown hat slid down over the ridge of his forehead as though trying to escape. He walked with a kind of hesitant weakness, a furtive pacing; yet strength ran in his thick chest and shoulders, his long, powerful arms, and a sultry, avid hotness nestled in his pale blue eyes.

"Jud!"

His jaws twitched. Damn that snoop-ing woman!

"Jud, you going downtown?" She was a thin, tired woman, once pretty, but the years had taken the hope out of her face. An apron at her waist, she stood on the porch fluttering a slip of paper in the bird-like claw of her hand.

"Jud," she called, "I need some things from the grocery."

"Send the kid."

"Pete's out playing somewheres."

Jud kept going. "Wait'll he gets back."

"But I need these for supper."

"Whatta ya think I am, a horse?"

"Jud, where you going?"

He answered in a surly voice, "Never

mind. It's none of your damn business." He turned on the sidewalk with never a backward glance.

He hardly saw where he was going. The hatred of Leslie Gramm that filled him churned in his brain like a sullen sea of fire. It was Gramm, the plant superintendent, who had kept him from getting to be a floor boss, or even boss of his section. Every year, some other guy got promoted, but not Jud Kerrun. Leslie Gramm didn't like him. Leslie Gramm had it in for him. Leslie Gramm would see to it that Jud never did get a better job at better pay.

The only way for Jud to fix that was to fix Leslie Gramm. Then there'd be a new foreman, and a step-up all down the line. Jud had the seniority right. He ought to be made at least a section boss this time.

The beauty of it was, nobody had any reason to suspect Jud. He and Leslie had never done more than exchange a few words at the plant. Nobody would dream that Jud had a motive. The cops would be off on a wild-goose chase. Labor troubles, strikes, clashes between rival unions had beset the plant all summer. The unions or strikers would get the blame.

The section of dilapidated old frame houses dropped behind him. The road turned, following a long hill to his left. An empty field stretched to his right. Some kids were playing sand-lot ball on its hard surface. A cluster of onlookers, their backs to Jud, watched the game. Nobody saw him. Anyway, they were all too far out in the middle of the field to notice him.

The road curved. Jud came to a path and started climbing the hill. Half-way up, he stopped, listened to make sure he was alone, and plunged into the dense underbrush and trees.

When he stepped out into the path again several minutes later, his hat was gone, he wore the red pullover sweater, and instead of the bundle under his arm he carried only the parcel, the size of a

big cigar box, the parcel that had a faint voice:

Tick, tock.

He loitered. He had passed this path often on his way to the plant. Another section of houses lay across the hill. He knew that only youngsters used the path, children going down to the field to play.

A little girl came down the path. She had stringy, taffy-colored hair, and wore a faded blue playsuit. Her bare arms and legs and back were chocolate brown from the sun. She glanced at him with the frank curiosity of the very young, but mostly her eyes strayed to his blazing red sweater.

Jud said, "Wanna earn two bits, kid?"

She stopped, eying the package that he held out. "Watcha got in there, mister?"

"Uh, a present for a guy. It's a clock. I want him to get it right away."

"Oh." She wrinkled her nose. "Mummy told me I could only stay out for a little while."

"This won't take a half-hour, and you'll have two bits to spend. All you have to do is deliver this. The address is 307 Front Street. It's a corner house. It's sort of a green color."

She nodded. "It's got a funny stone lion in front."

"Sure, sure, that's right. All you gotta do is leave this package there. Just ring the bell, and put it inside the screen door. You don't need to wait. It's a birthday present, and they'll know who it's from when they open it."

He held out two coins. "Here's fifteen cents. Hurry right back and I'll give you the other dime."

She looked dubious. "My mummy said—"

"You'll get home in plenty of time. It ain't far, nine or ten blocks. You can make it there and back in a half-hour, easy."

"My mummy doesn't want me to take things from grownups. She said so. She told me to keep away from strange men."

Jud cursed under his breath. He forced a toothy smile. "There, there,

that's all right. Your mother's right about that." He jangled the two coins. "I just thought a bright little girl like you'd like to earn a quarter, is all. It wouldn't hardly take twenty-thirty minutes."

She couldn't take her eyes off the coins. She said, with that exasperating, iron-clad, unanswerable logic of the very young and the very innocent, "Why don't you go? If you're going to wait for me here, you could bring the clock yourself, and come back here, and it wouldn't cost you a quarter."

Jud felt like spanking the infernal brat. He jangled the coins once more. "Guess I will, though I'm kinda tired walkin'. Run along. I'll find somebody that's smart and—"

He started to put the coins away. He was getting jittery. Somebody else might be coming along the path soon.

The receding money won her over. She thrust her hands out. "Gimme the quarter. I'll go."

Hesitantly, as though he, too, was changing his mind, Jud gave her the parcel and fifteen cents. "I'll give you the other dime soon as you're back."

She shook her head obstinately. "No. I want it now. How do I know you'll really wait for me?"

Jud could cheerfully have thrashed her. But he was almost in a panic. He couldn't stand here and argue with the little fool. The minutes were slipping by.

"All right. Here's the other dime. Now hurry! It's pretty near six-thirty. You gotta get the clock there by seven sharp. And hang onto this, don't drop it!"

"Why?"

Jud nearly yelled, "It's the guy's birthday and he won't be home tonight, see? He's gotta have this by seven o'clock! Run along, now, hurry! It's liable to get busted if you drop it!"

She went skipping down the path. Jud watched, his face working, till she was out of sight around a bend. He rubbed the back of his fist tightly across

the stubble on his chin. Then he faded into the woods.

He took off the red sweater, stuffed it in the empty shoebox, and rolled it up in the newspapers. The bundle looked the same as before. He put his battered brown hat on again.

A few minutes later, he strode down the path with the bundle under his arm. He savagely kicked a couple of loose stones out of his way. When he reached the sidewalk, he rolled a cigarette and stuck it in a corner of his mouth. It dribbled sparks as he sauntered homeward.



HE two dimes and the nickel made the little girl's palm sweat. After a while, she put a dime and a nickel in a handkerchief, made a ball out of it, and pushed it down in the pocket of her jumper suit. She kept the other dime in her hand.

She trudged along the path at the base of the hill. After the equivalent of a couple of long blocks, the hill came to an end. The field across the road also ended. In the near corner a group of boys was playing softball.

By the time she came back this way, it would be getting dark and the game would be over. It was more fun watching a game than carrying a funny old package that went:

Tick, tock.

Anyway, she had only seven or eight more blocks to go, and it wouldn't take long to get there. She could easily make it by seven o'clock. And what if she was a few minutes late? She couldn't see that it made any difference if the man got his darn old clock at seven or whenever, so long as he got it. The thing was, she couldn't stay out late. But she'd be home before dark. There was plenty of time.

She crossed the road and dawdled, watching the game. She knew several of the boys. They yelled at her and she

talked back fliply. Other boys, a few girls, and a couple of men watched the game. They were sitting along a bench made of weather-stained two by fours.

They moved over to make room for her. She sat holding the package in her lap, the package with a voice that whispered ever so faintly:

Tick, tock.

It was a funny kind of birthday present to give, she thought. She took the package and jiggled it against her ear, but it didn't rattle. It must be a pretty big clock. An alarm clock, maybe. Then she put the package back in her lap and forgot about it. Her thoughts strayed to the game.

Jimmy Roth was at the plate, jumping and yelling at the pitcher. The pitcher threw the ball underhand and Jimmy swung with all his might. Wham! The ball flew out over the infield, dropped between left and center, and went bounding away with both fielders hot after it.

Everybody was yelling at everybody else, somebody on second came tearing home, and Jimmy scooted around the bases so fast that he slipped and fell at third. The ball sailed in toward home plate. Jimmy picked himself up and raced for the bag. The ball beat him, but the catcher couldn't hold on to it. Jimmy crossed the plate with a home run as the ball bounced off the catcher's glove and spurted toward the bench.

It was lots of fun. The side went down.

"What's the score?" the little girl asked a man next to her.

"Sixteen to twelve."

"What inning?"

"Last of the fourth."

The game went on, and grew more exciting. The other side tied it up at sixteen to sixteen in the next half-inning.

The man beside her started to leave, and jostled her in doing so. The package slid off her lap. She grabbed for it. It teetered on her knees, almost dropping to the ground before her fingers got hold of the string.

She held the package against her ear, but the jiggling didn't seem to have hurt it any. The voice inside still murmured: *Tick, tock.*

She jumped to her feet. Absorbed in watching the game, she had forgotten all about delivering the package.

"What time is it, mister?" she asked the man who was moving away.

He looked at a wrist watch. "Quarter of seven."

She hurried off, half skipping, half running, for a couple of blocks before she slowed down. Seven o'clock, seven o'clock, kept repeating in her head. That was when he had told her she must deliver the package. No, he had said to deliver it before seven. Before seven. Ring the bell and leave it before seven. But running made her lose her breath. She was panting. Why hurry? Why run your legs off for a darn old clock? A clock that couldn't say anything but: *Tick, tock.*

She came to a small candy store and looked in the window longingly. Licorice sticks, taffy, horehound, chewing gum, candy bars, chocolates, caramels, mint wafers, all day suckers, jelly drops, lozenges, marshmallows, crackerjack, and other sweets lay temptingly spread out. The dime itched her palm moistly. What to buy? Five cents worth of mixed candy and a box of crackerjack? Or an all day sucker and a vanilla ice cream cone? Or a big double cone, chocolate and strawberry?

A swinging movement caught her gaze. Her eyes strayed to a wall clock with a pendulum. The hands stood at twelve minutes of seven. Every time the pendulum swung, she fancied she could hear it, and such a big clock would make a bigger noise than the clock she was carrying, a great big:

TICK, TOCK.

Twelve minutes to seven. Six blocks to go. It really hadn't ought to take more than ten minutes. But it would be longer, it would be after seven, if she stopped now and went in the store to

buy a double ice cream cone, chocolate and strawberry.

She reluctantly turned away from the windowful of candies. Her nose felt funny where she had held it against the glass. She rubbed it until the tingle went away.

A block farther, she reached a corner drugstore. The window had another one of those big clocks with a pendulum. The hand stood between ten and nine minutes of seven. She guessed she'd better hurry a little faster, or she wouldn't quite make it.

Before she could start running, a boy caught up with her and began to pass her, walking at a brisk, crisp clip. He was taller than she, and perhaps a year older. His tousled head sprouted from a scrawny neck. His hands were thrust deep into his pockets so that his elbows flapped as he moved. His stubby nose hung like a round little marble over his short upper lip. It gave his face a nasty look as though he had been caught in the act of stealing pennies from a playmate. She vaguely remembered seeing him on the bench at the ball game.

He looked at the little girl, and slowed up beside her. "Whatcher name?"

There was no answer, except that she hurried more.

"Whatcher name?" He kept pace with her.

"You leave me alone!"

"Whatcher hurry? You ain't scared or nothin', are you?"

She clenched the package tighter under her arm. She could almost feel its faint sound of:

Tick, tock.

The dime slid around in her damp palm. She wedged it between thumb and forefinger. "I'm not scared of you."

"Watcha scared of then, 'fraidy cat?"

"I'm not scared at all."

"Then watcha runnin' for, huh?"

"I'm in a hurry. I have to bring this to a man. He has to have it by seven o'clock."

"Why?"

"It's his birthday. He just has to have it by seven. That's what the man said."

"What's in it?"

"None of your business. You leave me alone!"

He persisted, "What's his name? How far does he live?"

"It's written down on the box. Go away!"

But he wouldn't leave. His eyes fastened on the coin that she held. "Watcha holdin' that for? What's he gonna give you for bringin' him the box?"

She began, "He paid me already—" and broke off, fearing she shouldn't have told him.

They were passing a grocery store. A light over the counter inside shone on the face of an alarm clock. The hands pointed to seven minutes of seven. Four blocks to go; she'd have to hurry.

She started across the street. He stayed at her side. He said, "Gimme that. I'll take it to him."

She shook her head, and brought her hand up to drop the dime into the single pocket of her playsuit. Her foot tripped on the curb. She stumbled forward, throwing her hands out to save herself. The package slid loose and began dropping to the sidewalk.

It happened fast. He grabbed her, tore the dime from her grasp, and snatched the package. He deliberately gave her a hard shove that sent her sliding along the cement on hands and bare knees. Then with a taunting yell he flew down the street.

She burst out crying. She picked herself up and took a few steps after him, but he was far ahead, and gaining. Her knees hurt. She looked down, and saw them scratched and bleeding with bits of sand imbedded in the skin.

She cried harder. She fumbled around for the handkerchief in her pocket and wiped her eyes. She felt the sharp edges of the other dime and the nickel through the cloth.

After a while she stopped crying. She tied a knot in the handkerchief and put it back in her pocket. She turned around,

trudging back toward the candy store and a double ice cream cone, strawberry and chocolate.



HE LOOKED over his shoulder after he had run half a block. The little girl wasn't chasing him. She was standing still, bawling. He ran hard for another block just to be safe.

Then he read the address on the package, his lips moving, "Leslie Gramm, 307 Front Street. Gee, that's only, let's see now, one, two, two and a half blocks more. Hey, old lady, got the time?"

An elderly woman stared down at him. She said, "Yes, my dear young fellow, I do have the time," and walked away indignantly.

He made a face at her back and went on down the street. It couldn't be seven yet, but close to it, maybe. The radio in a car parked at the curb spoke: "At this time every day, six fifty-five P. M., the baseball scores are brought to you through the courtesy of—"

He didn't hear the rest. Five minutes to seven. Two and a half blocks to go. Shucks, that was a cinch. Anybody could cover two and a half blocks in five minutes.

In fact, why hurry? Why go at all? He had the dime. Nobody knew that he had the package. Maybe there was something valuable in it. Nobody would ever know the difference if he just walked off with it.

He shook the package against his ear. It didn't rattle, but it made a sound like:

Tick, tock.

He looked at the package in disgust. A clock! It couldn't be anything else but an alarm clock, not in a package the size of a big cigar box. Most likely one of those cheap alarm clocks that you see in drugstore windows for eighty-nine cents. It wasn't worth even two cents to him. He couldn't use it. He couldn't eat it. He didn't want it. He'd have the

dickens of a time trying to trade it off or sell it.

He trudged glumly along. He had half a notion to chuck it into the road and forget about it. Let somebody else take care of the package. The dime was in his pocket. It was silly to go any farther. The dime . . .

"Girls don't play fair. They always lie," he mumbled.

The dime. She said she had already been paid. That didn't mean anything. She was lying. It was her dime to begin with. She wanted to get rid of him. She was afraid he'd steal the clock and get the money she was hoping for. Her dime. He could take the clock to the man, and the man would pay him another dime at least. That would make twenty cents.

He might as well take the package to where it was going. He might as well try to get there by seven. Things were different now.

He turned left at the corner of the jeweler's shop. The window was full of time-pieces—wrist watches and fob watches and clocks. Some of them weren't running. All of them showed different hours. But a cuckoo clock in the middle had a swinging pendulum. Its hands pointed to three minutes of seven. Two blocks to go. Two short blocks. Shucks, he could make it in no time. The sooner the better, and he'd have another dime to spend. The man would give him something if he got there on time. The package itself kept reminding him to hurry, with its insistent sound of:

Tick, tock.

He legged it for the next block. He could see the house, now, with a gray stone lion out in front. The lion squatted in the middle of the lawn. His back had a hollow place full of water, where the robins and sparrows took baths.

There were lights in the house. Cars stood along the curb. As he drew nearer, he heard quick, harsh blasts from a radio in the house. Someone was twirling the dial from station to station. He eyed the

cars, all five of them. It looked like a party.

Cars. Unwatched. His steps slowed. He remembered the time he had swiped a robe from a car on Center Street. And the purse he snatched from the seat beside a lady who stopped for a traffic light. Cars. Loot. The clock suddenly became small in his eyes. At most he'd get a dime for it. But the line of autos . . .

He didn't see anyone around. He entered the second car. For a few moments he peered out the windows, ready to jump and run. But nobody had seen him. He was safe. It was a cinch. He opened the dashboard tray, looked at the back seat, and poked into the side pockets. No luck. The only thing he found was a yellow case half full of powder. Girl stuff. The case might be gold. He put it in his pocket.

He took the package and slid out.

The radio in the house blared: "See the new Meridian watch at your jeweler's, the gift of the century. All styles, all prices, beginning at only thirteen ninety-five. If it's Meridian it's standard, the watch of the world. The time is thirty seconds before seven o'clock, Meridian watch time. We now bring you a special bulletin from the Radio News Service. . . ."

He hesitated. Thirty seconds to seven o'clock. The third car looked black and shiny. The package under his arm was marking off the seconds:

Tick, tock.



UD KERRUN watched his newspaper-wrapped bundle go up in flames. The red sweater made a smell of burning cloth. His wife didn't know about it. She wouldn't even remember it. He had told her months ago that he gave it away.

He liked the stealth, the leisure, the casual way he had worked. Phrases ran through his head, bits of information

that he had picked up at the plant simply by keeping his ears open. Leslie Gramm saying, "Friday's fine. But don't be late. We always have dinner at seven on the dot." And another time, "The seventeenth of next month? Afraid I can't make it, old chap. That's my birthday and I'll be spending the evening at home."

A blast echoed hollowly in the distance.

Jud hadn't realized how tense he was until the explosion came. He didn't start nervously. He didn't react at all. He had been expecting it all the time. But something inside him snapped.

The fire smouldered down to ashes.

He went back in the garage. He put into a box all the shotgun shells from which he had emptied the powder. The next thing to do was bury them.

Jud wondered just how it had happened. He had built the bomb to go off at seven, or whenever the package was opened. Maybe Leslie Gramm was having a birthday dinner. Maybe he waited till he had all his presents before opening them.

Jud finished with the shotgun shells. He was getting hungry. Any minute, now, his wife ought to call him to supper.

He started cleaning up the pieces of metal, wire, and materials on the work bench. A few minutes more, and he'd be through by seven-thirty.

The noise of the opening door made him whirl around, his face twitching. Damn that snooping woman! He'd ordered her never to interrupt him when he was in the garage. She'd never dared cross him before. He'd smack her for this!

But it wasn't his wife in the doorway. It was a cop. The cop looked at the work bench, the betraying pieces, and the tell-tale flakes of spilled powder.

Jud made a wild dive for the alley door of the garage. A powerful grip seized his shoulder and swung him around. Then fists like exploding dynamite were smashing his face, beating his features to pulp, breaking him in a kind of deliberate fury.

Through the pain and body concussions of those blows, Jud heard the cop's voice, harsh and murderous, in snatches of phrase:

"Don't care what they do to me down at H. Q. Stand up, guy, and take it. You've got lots more coming. Hash is all you'll be when I'm through . . . Told your wife and she fainted dead in her tracks. Said you were out here."

"This paper in my fist, it's the biggest piece of anything we found after the blast . . . List of groceries and the name they were to be charged to—Ker-run. She sends the kid off to get the groceries and you give him a bomb to deliver, only he didn't get there in time."

"God, your own kid . . ."



BEHIND THE BLACK MASK

Last week we called up THEODORE TINSLEY and said to him, said we, "Ted, how about opening your soul to us? Frank Gruber did it last month, and now it's your turn. How do you write those Jerry Tracy stories?"

Ted said, "What's that? The baby's crying and I can't hear you."

So we raised our voice and shouted, which resulted in the following.

Before you turn over the page and begin Theodore Tinsley's new story, "Station K-I-L-L," perhaps you'd like to share with us this look behind the scenes:

Ted Tinsley now broadcasting:

The editor of Black Mask wants to know (a) how I think up Jerry Tracy stories, (b) how I write 'em.

I've picked up Jerry Tracy ideas from all kinds of places—but this is the first time I ever found one in an ashcan. The ashcan was on 50th Street in the short block between Broadway and Seventh Avenue. Some one had thrown away an old peaked cap. I took one look at it and thought about Jerry Tracy. (Naturally, when you're a writer of detective stories on a Broadway prow for ideas, you're not thinking about the price of potatoes in Ireland.) So the junked cap

instantly became a brand-new, imported snapbrim fedora.

That seemed queer! Why should Jerry Tracy toss his brand-new hat in a 50th Street ashcan? It wasn't so damned queer when I took a mental look at the Little Guy's hat and found a bullet hole through the crown! That was all the start I needed, particularly after I glanced east past the Sixth Avenue elevated and caught a glimpse of the dizzy stone pinnacle of Radio City. *Flash!* Someone must have taken a pot-shot at Tracy while he was on his way to a broadcast! And that, believe it or not, is how I got the idea.

Writing the yarn is a bit more complicated. It usually happens like this: I rise as late as possible, enjoy a leisurely breakfast, smoke two cigarettes, wait to see what the postman has brought, play with my thirteen-months-old daughter a while, sharpen three pencils, rearrange my Royal portable, look out the window, think wistfully how nice it would be if I were a plumber, an aviator or a subway motorman. . . .

At this point my wife comes in very quietly, pulls down the shade, removes all books, papers and magazines, then goes away, locking the door behind her.

After that I write the story.



WARNING TO CRANKS

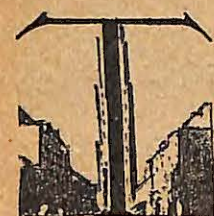
If you want to stay cranky, look out for Star Single-edge Blades! They're so keen, they're so gentle with a tender skin that if you're not careful, you'll be smiling all over. Famous since 1880! Star Blades cost little: 4 for 10¢. Star Blade Division, Brooklyn, N. Y.



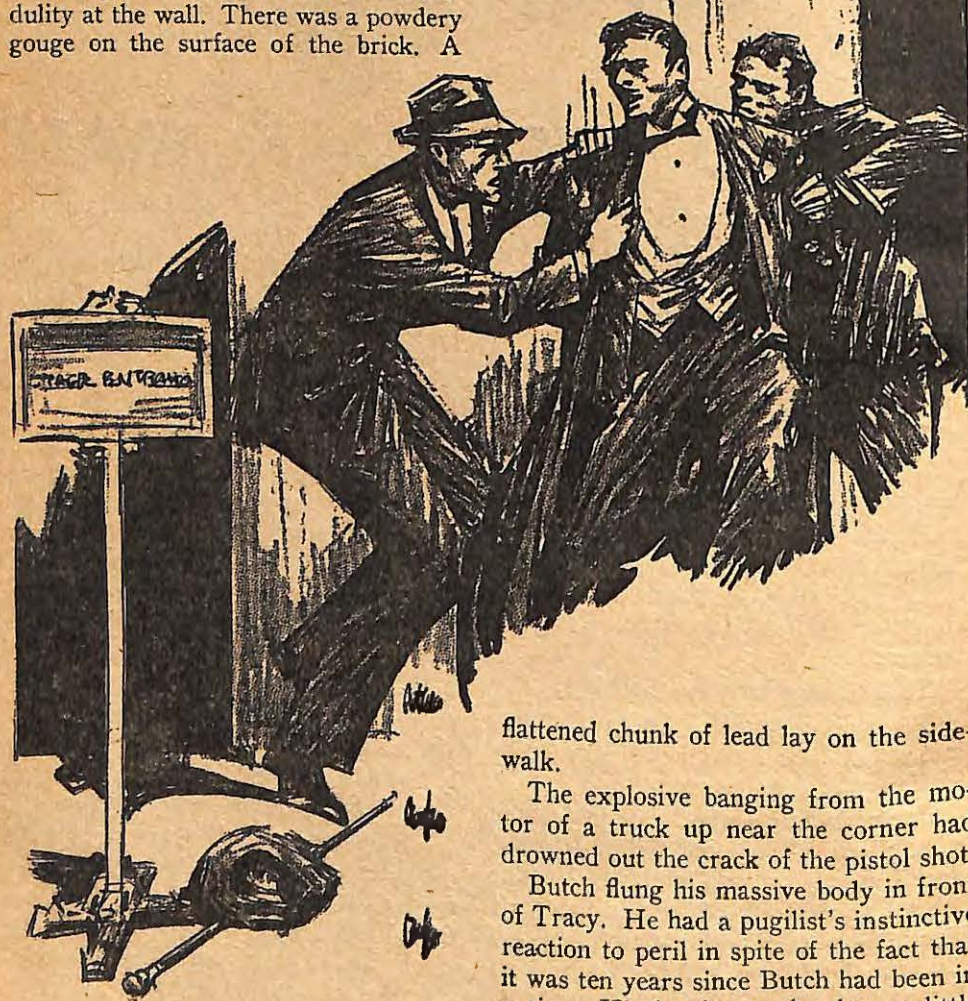
STAR SINGLE-EDGE BLADES 4 FOR 10¢
FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

STATION K-I-L-L

It was a network of greed over which Jerry Tracy broadcast a sentence of death



HE bullet whizzed through the crown of Jerry Tracy's fedora, tilting the hat crookedly over his left temple. He heard the thwack of the leaden slug against the brick theater wall that paralleled the sidewalk. Whirling, he stared with dazed incredulity at the wall. There was a powdery gouge on the surface of the brick. A

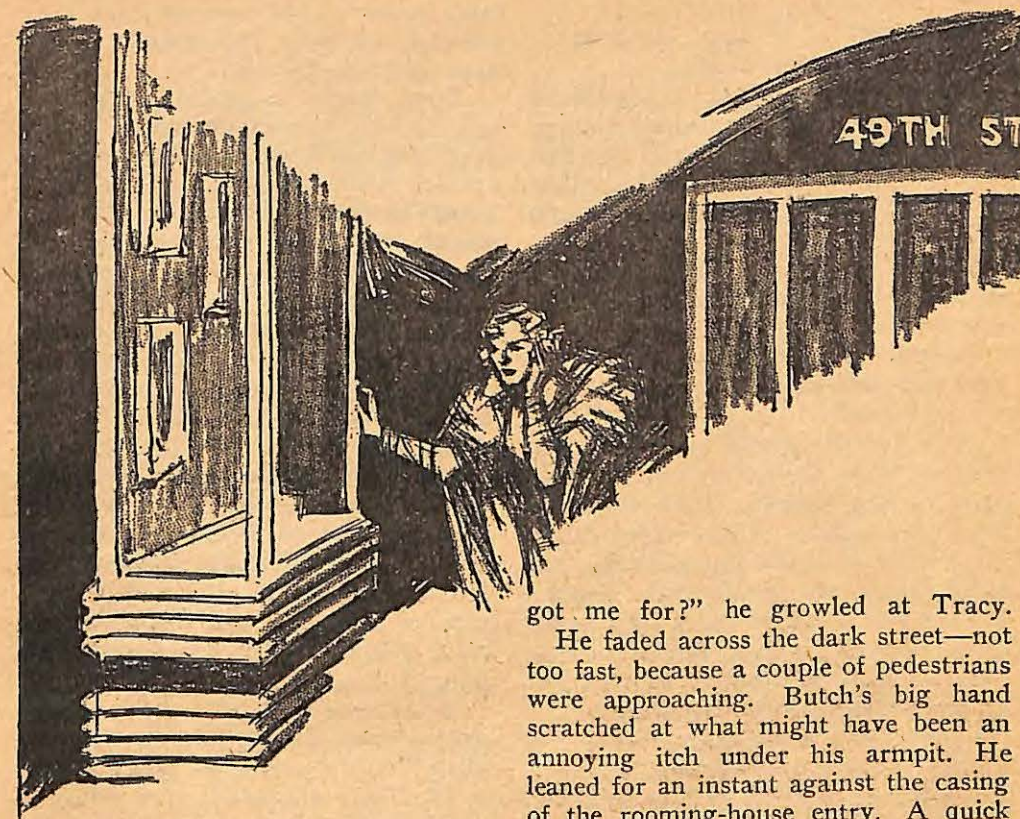


flattened chunk of lead lay on the sidewalk.

The explosive banging from the motor of a truck up near the corner had drowned out the crack of the pistol shot.

Butch flung his massive body in front of Tracy. He had a pugilist's instinctive reaction to peril in spite of the fact that it was ten years since Butch had been in a ring. His loyalty to the dapper little columnist of the *Daily Planet* went beyond his duties as body-guard and made

By THEODORE TINSLEY



got me for?" he growled at Tracy.

He faded across the dark street—not too fast, because a couple of pedestrians were approaching. Butch's big hand scratched at what might have been an annoying itch under his armpit. He leaned for an instant against the casing of the rooming-house entry. A quick glance inward and he vanished without hesitation.

Tracy guessed sourly: "The gunner must've made a backyard sneak."

He remembered suddenly that he was down on one knee, alongside a bullet-drilled hat and a flattened slug. The slug was still warm as Tracy palmed it and dropped it into his pocket. He got up, kicking petulantly at a crack in the sidewalk for the benefit of the two staring pedestrians.

One of them kept going. The other—the dopier of the two—said solemnly: "S'matter, Mister? Didja fall?"

"Yeah."

"Ain'tcha gonna pick up your hat?"

Tracy looked at it. The two holes in the soft crown were hidden by the flare of the upturned brim.

"You saw me fall!" Tracy said in a

him risk his own life without hesitation.

But no more bullets came from the dingy row of rooming houses across the street.

"Are you hoit, Jerry?" Butch growled.

"I'm O.K. Where'd it come from? That middle doorway?"

"I t'ink so."

That doorway, in the middle of a row of rooming houses, was slightly ajar. The street was a narrow one, and someone with a lousy aim had gummed up a perfect ambush.

"Stay here!" Tracy snapped.

"Nuts to you," Butch said. His beefy palm shoved hard. Tracy spilled awkwardly to one knee and his tilted hat fell off. "What the hell do you think you

brisk, lawsuit tone. He flipped out a notebook and a pencil. "What's your name? Where do you live?"

"Who, me?" The dope reared like a pony. "I didn't see nothing."

He went rapidly away. Tracy picked up the drilled hat. He ripped out the monogrammed sweatband and dropped the hat in a near-by ashcan. That changed it from a front-page news item to a hunk of junk.

Butch's big lop-eared face was peering from the doorway across the street. Tracy joined him.

"Did the guy get away?"

"Yeah. But I wanna show you something he lost."

They tiptoed quietly across the dim floor so as not to attract any attention from curious lodgers. They descended steps to the yard. It was paved except for a strip of earth alongside the rear fence where tall weeds grew. Butch's big feet had smudged the smaller prints of the escaped fugitive. Butch had gone over the fence in a hurry but the other fellow had enjoyed too big a start.

There was a cellar on the other side, Butch reported glumly, and a white-washed alley that led to the rear street. The guy must have had a car parked, one with a nice, speedy pick-up.

"This here is what I meant," Butch said, pointing downward at the weeds. "The guy musta tore it off on the same nail that almost ruined my—"

"Let's not go into biology," Tracy said dryly.

He picked up the white carnation that had fallen by the fence. There are all kinds of carnations, beginning with the ones you can buy for a nickel from sad-looking street peddlers. This was the expensive kind, the sort Bert Lord always wore.

There was no surprise in Jerry Tracy's mind. He had suspected Lord the moment the bullet had ripped through his hat. The sleek, good-looking Englishman must have found out what Tracy was going to spill on the air tonight in his cigarette broadcast. It

was hard to keep juicy items like that under cover. Scandal tipsters, particularly women, had a vengeful habit of phoning the victim beforehand, to make sure that the barb hurt.

Tracy wanted it to hurt. He never used poison arrows except on crooks. And Bert Lord was the dirtiest kind of crook. The sort who go after easy dough by the marriage route. It was so fatally easy, too, when the girl was twenty-three, pretty as a rotogravure special, and too decent to smell a rat hidden under a layer of barber-shop culture and British tweeds.

Tracy could have gone directly to Bruce Hilliard, or perhaps to Hilliard's young and socially ambitious wife; but the radio method was better. When you told the world—and that included the ships at sea—that the adopted daughter of Tracy's own cigarette sponsor, Bruce Hilliard, was in love with a sleek graduate of a British jail, it didn't leave Alice Hilliard much chance to do anything foolish.

It didn't leave Lord much chance either, except for a quick try at murder along Tracy's usual route to Radio City.

The *Daily Planet's* dapper columnist dropped the carnation into the pocket that contained the flattened bullet. Butch gave his employer a low-lidded glance.

"Would this thing have somepin to do wit' tonight's broadcast, boss?"

Tracy had recovered his composure. His voice sounded as thin as a dime. "I'll give you the air instead of putting you on if you don't mind your own business, Butch."

Tracy stopped at an avenue shop and bought a new hat. To appear bareheaded was not in the well dressed Tracy manner; it might excite curious comment.

"Wind blow it away, sir?" the clerk asked politely.

"I threw it away. It had a rat hole in it."

"You mean a moth hole, sir?"

"I mean a rat hole."

It was a foolish thing to say, but he couldn't resist the quip. He took a cab

over to Radio City. He always came and went by the rear elevator used by bandsmen with their bulky instruments. It was insurance against nuts and cranks. Tracy's broadcast was done from a private studio. The public never saw him at the mike; and if they hung around the rear corridor, Butch's shoulder took care of that.

But Butch didn't try to shove away the girl in the furred wrap. She stepped quickly in front of Tracy.

"Please! I've got to talk to you."

It was Alice Hilliard. Slim and lovely, with blue eyes and hair the color of strained honey. Butch and Tracy got the same look at her, but saw different things. Butch noticed the slender line of thigh and hip candidly molded by the evening gown, the soft cleft of her bosom as she swayed appealingly toward Tracy. Tracy saw only her eyes. They were filled with tears.

"Jerry, don't do it! I realize you're trying to protect me. But, Jerry, you're not God! You can't judge a man and condemn him and punish him in one—"

So she knew! That made it tougher.

"Who told you?"

"The woman who phoned you the scandal tip was vicious enough to telephone me, too. Jerry, you're so wrong about Bert. He's a straight shooter."

Tracy's nostrils whitened. "Not so damned straight at that," he said. "Almost six inches too high."

"Wait until next week before you—"

"A week and you'll marry the louse." He stared at her. "Won't you?"

Before she could answer, a suave, perfectly modulated voice sounded behind them. "Mr. Jerry Tracy, I believe? The scandal-monger?"

The man had stepped noiselessly into the corridor from the street. The first thing Tracy saw was the fresh white carnation in his lapel. He was a tall, strongly built man in his middle thirties, with a dark smudge of mustache and a scrubbed, pink skin. His clipped voice was insultingly polite. He was wearing dinner clothes under a Chester-

field. His expression was cool and remote, like a British gentlemen in an ad for Scotch whiskey.

Alice Hilliard gave him a quick, frightened look. "Bert, you mustn't—"

"I'm afraid I must," Lord said. He took her gently by the arm and turned her toward the street exit. "A black-mailer can always be reasoned with—that's the heart of his trade. Wait for me in the public lounge, darling. I think I can promise you there'll be no dirt concerning you and me on the wireless this evening."

Alice hesitated, then she obeyed. It irked Tracy to witness her childlike submission. After she had left, Butch stared grimly at the fresh white carnation in Lord's lapel.

"He musta just bought himself a new one. Jerry, is this guy the louse?"

Lord's gloved hand tightened on his Malacca stick. But he kept his hard, smiling gaze on Tracy.

"I'm not used to haggling. What's your lowest price?"

"Take him, Butch," Tracy snapped. "I want his gun."

Butch dove with a low growl of pleasure. Lord's cane struck like a whiplash at Butch's skull, be he swerved and took the blow on his hunched shoulder. There was a quick, panting tussle, followed by a shrill squeal. Lord's stick was wrenched from his grasp and fell clattering to the floor.

One of Lord's arms was twisted behind his back. The painful angle at which it was bent drained Lord's face of color. Butch's big knee was poised for an upward thrust at the belly of his antagonist.

"Stand still, pal, or I'll rupture you. Go ahead, Jerry."

Tracy frisked the man. There was no gun.

"What did you do with it?" Jerry asked him tonelessly. "Park it somewhere after you went over the backyard fence?"

Lord didn't say anything until Butch released him. Then profanity bubbled

from him in a husky whisper. Nasty stuff. Gutter talk from the slums of London. All of his culture forgotten.

"You bloody fool! I'll 'ave your 'eart for this!"

"I'm skipping that gunplay of yours a while ago," Tracy told him steadily. "But I have no intention of skipping the broadcast. If you have any sense, you'll hop the nearest garbage scow and take a quick sneak to England."

Lord's narrowed eyes were bits of mica. He kept watching Tracy with a bloodless smile as he adjusted the damage to his clothing. He picked up his cane. When he finally spoke he had regained both his self-control and his faultless accent.

"I'm int'rested in your remark about gunplay and a backyard fence. Are you suggesting—"

"I'm suggesting that you get the hell out of New York and let Alice Hilliard alone."

"Cards on the table, eh? Right-o. I think I can play any style of game that suits you, Mr. Tracy. If you slander me on the wireless tonight, I'll see that you stop living. Good evening."

He left the building with a quick stride. Butch growled "Nuts!" as Tracy grabbed him. The columnist swung him around and punched the elevator button.

"It's eight o'clock sap! I'm on the air in thirty seconds."



HEY ascended swiftly. In the upper corridor a man's head was jutting anxiously from a doorway. At sight of the *Daily Planet's* columnist his worried forehead smoothened and he patted the tip of his nose as a signal to someone inside the broadcasting room.

Tracy was arriving exactly on time. Even a bullet couldn't spoil his record of never being late for his weekly gossip show.

The announcer was reading the com-

mercial at the floor mike. Tracy slipped into his familiar wooden chair, grabbed his table mike, placed the neat pile of script pages under his eyes. The announcer's voice crackled with the familiar introduction that once a week turned a million listening ears toward loud speakers:

"And now the Hilliard Tobacco Company reminds you that 'Where there's smoke there's fire.' Light up and let America's greatest gossip columnist tell you the news you like to tell your neighbors! Presenting—Jerry Tracy!"

Jerry came in as he always did, like sleet bouncing off a tin roof. He ripped competently through his assignment, tossing each script sheet to the floor as he finished it. The squib about Bert Lord was not in the script. Tracy would be deliberately breaking studio rules by inserting it. He watched the clock and killed his last item to make room for it. He was conscious of the gasp of the announcer as he spoke his piece with hard, nasal clarity:

"What British crook has come to the U.S.A. under forged passports on a suave hunt for cigarette money? According to your correspondent's information this gentleman's specialty has led him close to the adopted daughter of a well known tobacco tycoon. 'Where there's smoke there's fire' is a swell warning for a crook to remember. It may save him a bad burn when the girl's father realizes what's going on. Will the crook be smart and scram? *Lord only knows!*"

Tracy's jaw was tight at the sign-off. Dabney, the announcer, stared curiously at him. Dabney was a veteran on the hour and a good friend of Tracy's.

"It's none of my business, Jerry, but did Bruce Hilliard O.K. that last item?" "Why?"

"I just wondered. Do you think it's a good idea to dump a load of dirt in the front yard of your own sponsor?"

"If you got the point," Tracy said slowly, "Hilliard will, too. That's what I wanted. If I have to, I'll take the

rap for it," he added grimly.

"Looks like you may have to," Dabney said.

A light began to flash inside a glassed booth. It was Tracy's private phone to enable him to take last minute news flashes from his secretary. Dabney answered the call, said very gently. "Yes, Mr. Hilliard."

The voice on the phone was thick with anger. Tracy had to listen hard to make out the slurred words.

"What the hell do you mean by publicly humiliating my daughter? If you had information that this Bert Lord is a crook why didn't you come privately to me?"

"Because your daughter is a headstrong girl, Mr. Hilliard. I don't think you could have stopped her. Or your wife, either. You might have made it tough, but I wanted to make it impossible. That's why I went on the air and told the world."

"Damned kind of you! I'll expect to see you in fifteen minutes. If you're not—"

"I'll be there," Tracy said quietly.

He glanced wryly at his watch. Eight thirty-two. He'd expected a quick reaction and he'd got it—two minutes after the sign-off.

He scribbled the name and address of Bert Lord on a card and handed it to Butch.

"I want you to watch this guy's apartment. It's a swanky penthouse, with a private entrance and a private elevator. If Alice Hilliard shows there, stop her. Make a scene, grab her purse, do anything that will get the two of you picked up by cops. Phone me at Hilliard's home from the police station. I'll take care of everything. Scram!"

Butch nodded. If Tracy had asked him to disrobe in Times Square and bark like a dog, the order would have been cheerfully obeyed. In Butch's simple philosophy there was always a sensible reason for everything Tracy did. His big feet went rapidly away.

A few minutes later Jerry Tracy de-

scended in the rear elevator and emerged on the sidewalk. There was a row of taxis parked along the curb. He slammed himself into the first in line.

Before he could talk to the driver, the door on the street side of the cab opened and slammed. Alice Hilliard dropped panting into the seat beside Jerry. She had come racing from a doorway across the street. Tracy, who had just sent Butch to head her off from Bert Lord's penthouse, was completely discomfited. Alice's sob didn't help him much, either.

In a stony voice he gave the driver Hilliard's address.

"I'm going with you," Alice said.

"You're foolish. You're only making it tougher. Why not let me drop you off at your own apartment?"

"Sorry. I want to be there when you tell Father that I'm in love with a louse."

"Oke by me." His shrug stung her to anger.

"If you're wrong about this, I'll never let up on you, Jerry! Not until I've driven you from New York."

"And if I'm right?"

She didn't reply.



HILLIARD'S home was an ornate old-fashioned dwelling on a west side street that rammed into a quiet dead end above the twinkling darkness of Riverside Drive. The house was set back from the sidewalk and there were green, park-like grounds. Tracy rang the bell and waited. There was no answer.

"That's funny. Aren't there any servants in this joint?"

"It's their night out, except the butler, and father's a little deaf," Alice suggested. "Perhaps he can't hear the bell."

"Does he have to? He's got a butler and a secretary and a wife."

"A very pretty wife, too," Alice said.

Her soft words made Tracy glance sharply at Hilliard's adopted daughter.

Alice and Betty were almost the same age. Tracy had never thought of friction between them, but he did now. He had supposed that Alice's switch to a small apartment downtown had been her tactful withdrawal from an oldish foster father with a young wife.

"You don't like Betty very much, do you?" Tracy said, his columnist's mind instinctively probing this new angle.

"I admire her," Alice said.

Tracy seemed to remember vaguely a young man named Kenneth Dunlap. Betty Hilliard had seen a lot of him before her marriage to the tobacco king. Tracy could tell nothing from Alice's blue eyes as she opened her evening bag. She didn't find what she was searching for.

"This is ridiculous. I seem to have lost my key to the house. I distinctly remember putting it in the bag with my own apartment key."

"Did you have dinner tonight with Bert Lord?"

Alice didn't answer. But one look at her face told Tracy his suspicious guess had scored a bull's-eye.

"Wait here," he said curtly. "Maybe I can find an unlatched window."

He darted around the side of the house, flitting swiftly through the darkness. His face was wrinkled with sudden apprehension. Why should Bert Lord want to steal Alice's key? Was it because Alice had warned him what Tracy intended to do on the radio tonight? Lord might take any steps to keep Hilliard from hearing that broadcast.

There was sweat on Tracy's forehead as he lifted an unfastened window on the ground floor.

The main hallway was quiet under the glow of shaded lamps. Tracy unlocked the front door and admitted Alice. There was a dim light burning in the reception room to the left of the hallway. The room was empty. Tracy crossed to an inner door and knocked. When there was no answer, he opened the door.

Tracy took one look and stiffened. The rustle of Alice's evening gown seemed enormously loud in the room's stillness. She swayed and Tracy caught her as she fainted, lowered her down gently.

He lowered her gently to the floor and walked toward the dead man. Bruce Hilliard was lying on the study rug where he had fallen from a wide-armed chair. He had been shot twice; through the head and through the chest.

Evidently death had come to him without warning. His blood-smeared face was placid. He was lying close to a console radio cabinet which stood alongside his desk.

Tracy had seen enough gunshot wounds in his career to recognize lethal bullet holes when he saw them. The slug through Hilliard's skull had pierced his brain; the hole in his chest was directly over his heart. The body was faintly warm to Tracy's touch.

No doctor on earth, Tracy thought grimly, could ever decide which of those two shots had actually killed Hilliard. It puzzled him why the murderer should have risked firing twice. The shots must have raised thunderous echoes in the house. Did the killer know the house was empty? Where was Hilliard's pretty young wife—and his secretary, and his butler?

All this and more zipped through Tracy's mind in the few seconds he stared at the corpse. There was no gun near the body and he made no effort to search for it. He wrapped a handkerchief around his hand and picked up the phone. He called police headquarters and recognized the voice at the switchboard.

"Jerry Tracy speaking! Is Inspector Fitzgerald around?"

Inspector Fitzgerald was one of Tracy's oldest friends. Out of their mutual trust had come Tracy's unofficial tie-up with the police department. Fitz was an honest and fearless cop. Tracy had his finger on many pulses. The combination had solved

many a baffling case in the past.

Luckily Fitz was still at headquarters. Tracy told him the news and Fitz said quietly, "O.K. Stay where you are. I'll be up there in a hurry."

Fitzgerald hung up at the other end, but Jerry continued to talk. In picking up the phone he had turned about, so that his back was toward the unconscious figure of Alice Hilliard. He caught a sudden glimpse of her pale face in the square, gilt-framed mirror on the wall behind Hilliard's desk.

It was the sight of Alice's eyelids that made Jerry continue to talk calmly into a dead wire. He crowded close to the desk, so that his left hand that depressed the phone's cross-bar was invisible to the girl lying on the floor in front of the sofa.

Alice was faking that swoon of hers! Her eyelids were quivering. She was so intent on watching the back of Tracy's head that she failed to notice the mirror.

She was lying closer to the sofa's edge than she had been when Tracy had left her. One of her arms was under the sofa, moving slowly. She became rigid as Tracy cradled the phone and walked casually toward her.

He was still holding his handkerchief. He stood staring down at her limp body, aware of a quick feeling of pity. A loyal girl in love with a rogue could learn trickery swiftly!

She screamed as Tracy clutched suddenly at her gloved hand and jerked it into view. She was still holding the gun she had tried to push out of sight.

There was a quick, sharp struggle, then Tracy's handkerchief-swathed hand closed on the barrel and he wrenched the revolver from Alice's grasp.

The gun was an English model, A Webley. Two of the chambers had been exploded. There was a strong acid reek of burned powder at the muzzle.

Tracy said gently to the sobbing girl: "Do you love Bert Lord that much?"

"He didn't do it! He couldn't have!" Her face lifted and it was white with

horror. She stared at Tracy numbly.

"Better sit up and take it easy," Tracy said tonelessly. "We'll just forget about this little episode. Inspector Fitzgerald will be here in a few minutes. I'll tell him I found the gun."

She sank down on the sofa. Tracy stared grimly at the gun he had laid on Hilliard's desk.

He was turning away to examine the rest of the study when he heard a sudden faint squeak. Someone was lifting a window in the adjoining reception room!

Before Tracy could move there was a quick thud of feet beyond the curtained doorway. A man's hand thrust fiercely past the edge of the curtain and jabbed at the light switch. The study was plunged into darkness.

The murder gun was the first thing Tracy thought of. He snatched it up by the barrel, throwing out a blindly defensive arm as the unseen figure of his assailant raced through the blackness toward Hilliard's desk.

A fist crashed against Tracy's arm, numbing it from shoulder to elbow. The blow toppled him against a high-backed chair. He managed to reel aside and to overturn the chair between himself and his foe. It gave him only a second's respite, but that was all the time he needed. He remembered a high-topped cabinet in a corner of the room. He threw the Webley revolver upward, hoping it would land out of sight.

The clatter of the overturned chair drowned out the thud of the gun as it landed among piled books and papers on the top of the cabinet. Somewhere in the dark Alice Hilliard was screaming with terror.

Tracy dived to the floor, clutching at the legs of his foe. A knee banged against his forehead, filling his brain with dancing stars. Then he was knocked flat. Fingers clutched swiftly at him in a search for the murder gun. His pockets were probed, his coat was ripped open.

He heard a fiercely muttered oath in

a voice he thought he recognized as Bert Lord's.

Then the front doorbell began to ring. The sound of it revived Tracy's waning strength. Clawing wildly, he managed to trip his antagonist. The two rolled over and over on the floor.

Dimly, Tracy realized that Inspector Fitzgerald was waiting patiently outside the street entry, unaware that a trapped murderer was fighting desperately to get away. He tried to yell at the top of his lungs, but a fist smashed at his stomach and drove the wind out of him.

His feeble hold on his enemy was broken. He heard a rush of feet toward the outer room. The overturned chair helped him to pull himself drunkenly to his feet. He staggered headlong through the darkness toward the doorway. The velvet curtain steadied him while his blurred eyes swung toward the open window.

He could see vaguely a tall, racing figure outside the house, vanishing swiftly toward the rear of the grounds. Tracy was trying to swing a leg over the windowsill, when a man's voice yelled harshly behind him. He was dragged violently backward.

Someone began savagely pummeling him. Blood trickled from Tracy's nose. A blow on the chin almost snapped his head off. His knees bent and he would have pitched to the floor except for the quick clutch of the fool who seemed to have unwittingly helped Lord to make a clean getaway.

"The window!" Jerry gasped through waves of pain. "Get him—window!"

Fitzgerald didn't seem to understand. He dragged Tracy toward the wall where the light switch was located. There was a click and a sudden flare of brilliance.

Tracy said thickly: "Fitz, you damned fool, you've—"

Then his voice trailed into silence. It wasn't Fitz at all! He was a good-looking young man with a straight, slim back and a crown of dark, glossy hair.

The young man cried fiercely: "You dirty little sneak-thief! How did you get in here—and what were you up to?"

A moment later both men recognized each other. The excited young man was Walter Furman, Hilliard's missing secretary.

"Right now I'm not up to—much of—anything," Tracy gasped, and proved it by slumping into unconsciousness.



WHEN Jerry recovered his senses the first thing he heard was the angry snarl of Inspector Fitzgerald.

"I don't care what you thought! What the hell did you have to beat him up like that for?"

"I didn't. The fellow who went out the window did most of it. I thought Tracy was a burglar. I didn't realize what had happened until I turned on the lights."

Tracy's eyes opened. He was on the same sofa where, centuries earlier, he had told Alice Hilliard to lie quietly. She was slumped nearby in a chair, her dulled eyes staring tragically at the floor.

The room was full of people. There were a couple of uniformed cops. A finger-print expert and a police photographer were standing stolidly in a corner, watching a bald-headed man who was crouched on his knees beside Bruce Hilliard's corpse. That was Grady, the medical examiner.

Hilliard's secretary was still trying to explain to Fitzgerald what had happened.

"As I told you, no one answered the bell and I let myself in with my key. Naturally I was suspicious of trouble. When I found the lights turned out, and caught a man racing toward an opened window, I didn't pull punches."

The medical examiner got to his feet. "Impossible to tell which shot killed him, though I suspect he took the one

through the skull first. When you're mad enough to kill a guy twice, you don't aim at the heart. That was probably done to make sure. Hard to set the time. Could have been a half hour, could have been an hour and a half."

"He was alive at 8:32," Tracy said slowly. "That's when he phoned me at the broadcasting studio. I'd just finished my program."

"That might fit," Grady said. "Body's still fairly warm. No time for *rigor mortis*. He probably took it while you were on the way over here. The killer was either mad with rage or a blasted psychopath. I may have more dope after the autopsy. Good night, Fitz."

He went out with a brisk tread.

"I heard your broadcast tonight, Jerry," Fitz said abruptly. "Did that crack you made about Hilliard's adopted daughter have anything to do with this kill?"

Tracy glanced at Alice. Her pale face seemed drained of everything but an overpowering exhaustion.

"Tell him, Jerry."

Tracy shrugged. He told of the scandal tip he had received over the phone from some unknown woman. He told of his check-up on it, and recounted the attempt on his life on the way to the broadcast. He showed Fitz the flattened slug and the white carnation which the escaping gunman had dropped.

"I'm certain it was Bert Lord. Having failed to wipe me out before I could ruin him on the radio, he rushed over here, let himself in with a key he had stolen from Alice's bag, and bumped Hilliard. He must have figured some stunt to get every one else out of the house. . . . By the way, where were you, Furman?"

Fitzgerald answered for the secretary.

"His alibi is O.K. Jerry. Hilliard sent him over to the Delton Hotel to see Nick White about a show Hilliard was thinking of backing. I checked on that and Nick verified Furman's story. He was in Nick's suite from eight o'clock

until a quarter of nine. We know Hilliard was alive until 8:32 at least."

Tracy nodded. Nick White's word could be trusted. He was a fine old Irishman, a veteran producer and a friend of both Tracy and Fitzgerald.

Tracy got shakily to his feet and went over to the tall cabinet in the corner. Mounting a chair, he fished carefully behind the books and papers atop the cabinet with a handkerchief-wrapped hand.

Fitz gave a quick yelp of excitement as he saw the gun.

"I managed to toss it up there just before Lord tackled me," Tracy said. "That's what he came back for."

Fitz took the gun with almost cringing care.

"English make, eh? A Webley. Two chambers fired. All right, Hanley, give it the works."

Hanley was the finger-print man. He took the weapon over to Hilliard's desk.

While he was busy, Sergeant Killan came in. Killan was Fitz's right-hand man. He had a hoarse, friendly voice, a cobblestone head and a mouth like a mailbox slit.

"What did you find out upstairs?" Fitzgerald snapped.

"Not a thing," Killan said cheerfully. "Hilliard's wife flew the coop all right. So did the butler. Nothing upstairs to explain why."

Tracy gave Walter Furman a slow stare. "Were they both in the house when Hilliard sent you over to see Nick White?"

"Yes. Both of them came into the study to talk to Hilliard. Marcom—that's the butler—had some tradesmen's bills that had to be okayed. Mrs. Hilliard usually listened with her husband to the Tracy broadcast. But tonight she said she had a sick headache. She went up to her room to lie down just before I left the house."

Over at the dead man's desk the finger-print man suddenly ceased his monotonous whistling of a popular tune.

"Good news, Fitz," he said.

"What you got?"

"Two middle fingers of the right hand. Thumb blurred, but who cares? Maybe—"

He stopped talking as a woman's scream echoed with startling abruptness from the front hallway of the house.

Sergeant Killan, who was nearest to the door, bounced forward with a swiftly drawn gun in his beefy hand. He peered into the hall, gaped a moment, then holstered his weapon.

"All right, Halligan. Bring her in here."

Halligan was the cop who had been left on duty inside the front entry. He clumped stolidly into the room, his hand tightly gripping the arm of a dark-haired and exceedingly pretty woman.

"I caught her sneaking in the front door," Halligan said. "She had a key. She closed the door quietly and started to tiptoe down the hall toward the stairs. When I grabbed her she started to fight, till she saw my uniform, then she cooled down."

Tracy said dryly: "Better let go of her, officer. This is Mrs. Hilliard."

Betty Hilliard stood alone, very stiff and straight, seemingly aware of nothing except the murdered body of her husband. Her dark hair and eyes emphasized the pallor of her skin. She was like marble until she turned and saw Alice staring steadily at her. Then her face flooded with crimson.

"How did this happen, Alice?" she asked with an obvious effort at control.

"I wouldn't know, Betty."

"You could guess though, perhaps?"

There was pent-up hatred between these two women. Alice's jaw tightened at the sneer in Betty's voice. She turned swiftly toward Inspector Fitzgerald.

"You might as well know, Inspector, that it wasn't Bert Lord who tried to steal that gun. It was not his voice."

Fitzgerald didn't answer that. He walked across to Hilliard's desk and examined the two finger-prints that the headquarters expert had brought out on the butt of the Webley revolver.

"I'd like to get a quick check on these prints from London. Can you make a classification index for me right away?"

"Yeah." He took out of his bag a classification sheet printed in squared columns. Slowly he began to record with digits and letters the indices of the specimen print.

"How long were you away from home, Mrs. Hilliard?" Fitz asked the dead man's wife.

"Quite a while. I left shortly after Mr. Furman departed."

"Where did you go?"

Betty Hilliard took a long time replying. "I left to attend to some personal business which I have no intention of discussing with you or anyone else."

"Was your husband alive when you left?"

"Yes. He was in this room waiting to hear the Tracy program. I left with his permission."

Alice Hilliard's faint laughter had a sting in it, but the other woman ignored the implication.

"O. K. on that index synopsis," the finger-print man said.

Fitzgerald went to the phone and called the exchange manager. He identified himself and explained what he wanted. It didn't take long to put through the trans-Atlantic call. Fitzgerald talked briefly to Scotland Yard and then handed the phone to the finger-print man. It was not a very good connection. Hanley had to talk loudly and repeat his jargon of figures and letters over and over.

Fitz and Killan, who knew what it was all about, listened eagerly. But Tracy only pretended interest. His ear was cocked in an entirely different direction. Alice had drifted closer to Betty Hilliard. Her lips moved in a swift undertone.

"You're not kidding me. Who was the boy friend—Ken Dunlap?"

"It certainly wasn't Bert Lord! If you try to drag me into a scandal—"

"All I'm after is the truth. If those gun-prints belong to Bert, I want him

to pay the penalty. But if he's innocent, I'll know who's guilty. And if you think I won't produce those letters of yours—"

Alice saw Tracy and her murmur stopped.

The fingerprint man was still yowling into the telephone. "Yeah. All right. 'By." He pronged the receiver with an oath of relief.

"If they've got a match in the London files, there ought to be an answer in about an hour. I told him I'd take it at the bureau in Headquarters. Drop in when you're finished. I'll check our own files while I'm waiting."

"I'd like to borrow your ink pad and a couple of specimen sheets," Fitz said.

He didn't explain what he wanted them for and the print man didn't ask. But Tracy knew. He was grimly glad he had sent Butch to keep a watchful eye on the penthouse of Bert Lord. The challenging talk between Alice and Betty Hilliard hadn't changed Tracy's mind about the identity of the man with whom he had battled in the dark for possession of the murder gun. He felt sure that was Lord.

The only thing that still puzzled him was the continued absence of the butler. Where in hell was the elusive Marcom?

Unexpectedly Marcom answered that question himself. There was a timid knock at the rear door of the study and when Sergeant Killan sprang forward and threw open the door, Marcom was gaping with astonishment at the threshold.

His amazement changed to terror as Killan grabbed and yanked him into the room. He cringed at sight of Hilliard's sprawled body. Tracy, watching him narrowly, saw his eyes veer for a swift instant. They flicked toward Betty Hilliard and then went blank and expressionless.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Killan growled. "Sneak in the back door?"

"I didn't sneak through any door, sir. I came in the back way, using my regu-

lar household key. I heard voices here in the study and—"

"Was Hilliard alive when you went out? And how long ago was that?"

"About an hour, sir. I didn't speak to Mr. Hilliard about going out."

"Why not? Do you come and go as you please?"

"I had Mrs. Hilliard's permission. I was attending to an errand for her."

"Marcom is quite correct," Betty Hilliard said quickly. "As Mr. Furman has already told you, I retired to my bedroom with a headache. I found I had none of the special tablets I use, so I sent Marcom downtown to get some at the office of my physician."

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"You didn't ask me," Betty said calmly.

"Let's see those tablets," Killan told Marcom. He took the small package, unwrapped it, then smiled grimly. "I thought so. There's a half-filled box of these same tablets in the drawer of Mrs. Hilliard's night stand upstairs in her room. I know because I looked."

Betty's face paled. "I—I forgot I had them."

Inspector Fitzgerald waved his scowling assistant aside. His own voice was suave and friendly. "You're involving yourself in an unnecessary tangle, Mrs. Hilliard. If we don't know where you went—"

"You don't, and you won't!"

"The assumption, of course," Fitz explained patiently, "is that you got rid of the butler on a fake errand, so you could leave the house without the knowledge of your husband or Marcom. Probably by the rear door."

"Well?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm merely pointing out that a woman with a guilty knowledge of a well arranged murder might leave beforehand by the back door to avoid alarming her husband; and return by the front door in order to discover his murder, in case the butler was still away."

Betty's smile was ghastly. "You might

do a lot better, Inspector, by waiting for London to report on the finger-prints of Mr. Bert Lord."

Jerry Tracy shot her a quick question. "Are you the woman who phoned me the scandal tip about him?"

"Sorry. I'm not the type."

"You are, you liar," Alice said harshly. "I should have guessed that the tipster was you! Why didn't you tell Tracy, while you were spilling your dirty hints, to investigate the love life of a sleek young lad named Ken Dunlap?"

"If you dare to soil my name—"

"You've already done that yourself, darling. Your husband knew, too. If he hadn't died so suddenly tonight, there'd have been a divorce trial that would have sat you where you belong. In the gutter." Alice was shaking with rage. But Hilliard's wife remained frozenly composed. She said:

"As long as we're discussing charges, I think we had better stick to real facts. My husband's will, for instance."

"What about it?"

"It was about to be changed, cutting you and your precious British jailbird out of any share in your foster father's estate."

"That's a lie," Alice said.

"If it is, why did he give you a check this afternoon for fifty thousand dollars? Wasn't it your final quit-claim on the family—to get out and stay out?"

Tracy and Fitzgerald and Sergeant Killan were listening grimly. It was to them that Alice turned. Her effort to control herself made her voice almost inaudible.

"I've already told you that if Bert Lord is guilty of murder, I'll do everything in my power to help you convict him. I don't think he is, but the record of the finger-prints will settle that. The check to which my father's cheating little wife refers is actually a proof of Bert's innocence. It was given to me—and to him—here in this house this afternoon, as a wedding present."

"What?" Tracy gasped.

"It's true. Bert came here like a man and had a long talk with father. He denied those anonymous lies about his career in England and Father believed him. Father gave me a check for fifty thousand dollars and promised to stand back of Bert and me. All this talk about changing his will is pure spiteful invention on Betty's part."

She drew a deep sobbing breath.

"That's why Bert and I appealed to you, Jerry, at the broadcasting station tonight not to spill that lying gossip. It's why Father was angry enough to summon you to his home. He wanted the scandal covered up because he believed in Bert. He was trying to—to help us!"

"Then who killed him?" Tracy rasped.

"I don't know, I don't know."

She was weeping wildly. Betty, dark-eyed, somber, watched her with bold antagonism. For the first time in this whole cocksure evening, Tracy felt completely at sea.

Fitz rubbed his nose for a moment. "Remain here on duty until you're relieved," he told the gaping policeman at the study door. His glance moved toward Furman and the butler, toward the weeping Alice and the pale, scornful Betty. "Arrest anyone who attempts to leave this house. Come on, Sarge! Jerry, I'll need you, too."

The three of them piled into Fitz's shabby department car outside.

"Are you absolutely certain," Fitz asked Tracy sharply, "that it was Lord's voice you heard when you had that battle in the dark?"

"That's the one thing that's got me worried," Tracy admitted. "It sounded like him. I still think it was. But why did he forget the damned gun in the first place? And how did he know the house would be so conveniently empty when he killed Hilliard?"

"Where's this Lord live?" Fitz asked. Tracy told him. The car began to hum downtown.

"I sent Butch to watch Lord's pent-

house," Tracy said, "with orders to shadow him if he pulled a sneak."

Fitz nodded. "If he's innocent, he should have no objection to giving me a sample of his right hand."

"Suppose he refuses?"

"He can't," Fitz said grimly, "if he's arrested on suspicion of homicide."

BERT LORD'S address was a swanky apartment house on the East River fringe of the midtown district. He occupied a penthouse eighteen stories up. The building had a canopy, two doormen and a string of empty taxis outside. But Lord's penthouse afforded his comings and goings a privacy not enjoyed by the other tenants.

The entrance to his self-service elevator was on the river side of the building. A short dead-end street extended between the building and the river wall. A few empty cars were parked there, cool and quiet in the darkness. Lord's entrance was a small, inconspicuous door, set flush in the ground floor.

Butch was nowhere in sight.

A quick twist of the bronze doorknob showed Tracy that the lock of the private entrance was broken. He stepped into a narrow hallway that was pitch dark. Before Fitzgerald could snap on a pocket torch, Tracy stepped on an extended hand that lay limply on the floor.

Fitz's torch clicked a bright beam of light as Tracy recoiled with a gasp. The light centered on the back of an unconscious man's head. It was Butch, and he was lying flat on his face with blood oozing from a lump on his scalp.

Tracy dropped to his knees and turned Butch over. The practical Sergeant Killan shoved Jerry aside. He had a flat half-pint flask in his hand, and he didn't seem to mind how much of it he spilt. Before it was half empty Butch was gurgling weakly. His eyelids flut-

tered open, then blinked dazedly.

A moment later Butch uttered a yell and bounced groggily to his feet. He aimed a wild swing at Killan which the sergeant hastily ducked. Fitzgerald grabbed Butch's arm and pinioned it. His torch flared into the dazed body-guard's eyes, blinding him.

But it was Tracy's voice that cut through Butch's punch-drunk hangover from the blow on his skull.

"Snap out of it, champ! What happened? Where's Lord?"

Butch finished his own cure by draining Killan's flask.

It was Butch who had forced the lock on the street door, Tracy disclosed with a disgusted mumble. Butch had turned out the hall light himself, so he could watch the private penthouse elevator at the end of the corridor, without running the risk of being seen if someone looked in from the street.

"Just what the hell were you planning to do?" Sergeant Killan asked in a tone of blank wonder.

"Jerry told me to shadow the guy. I figured if he came down in the elevator, I'd rough the louse up, haul him back to his penthouse and phone Jerry. Ain't that what you wanted, Jerry—shadow him and then let you know how I made out?"

Killan snickered and Tracy said harshly, "Skip your detective methods and tell me what happened."

"Well, the bum wasn't upstairs at all. He musta sneaked in on gumshoes from the sidewalk while I was watchin' the elevator. I took somepin' on the skull. . . . That's nice liquor you got, Sarge."

Fitzgerald said glumly, "Looks like a pick-up after all. Lord's probably high-tailing it out of town, but a quick alarm ought to nail him before he can get far."

"He ain't outa town," Butch said patiently. "The guy's upstairs, unless he come down again."

"Huh?" Fitz stared at him with his mouth open.

"He went up. I heard him go stumblin' in the elevator before I passed out."

The shaft door at the end of the corridor wouldn't open. Fitz punched a button and a faint hum became audible from aloft.

"The car is still up above," Fitz muttered. "Did the sap actually waste time to pack a bag before he scrambled?"

They rode up in an uneasy silence to the penthouse. Lord's door was on the opposite side of a small foyer. Sergeant Killan tried the knob gently, then rang the bell.

Almost instantly a voice cried from within, "Who is it? What do you want?"

It was Lord's voice, shrill with fright. He was evidently standing tensely just inside the door. Tracy motioned quietly to Killan and stepped closer.

"This is Jerry Tracy. I want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About my broadcast tonight. Mr. Hilliard sent me over to—"

"Hilliard sent you?"

"Yes."

"Is anybody with you?"

"No."

"You're a liar. Hilliard's dead! You've come racing over here with the cops. I didn't kill Hilliard. I'm not going to be framed for his murder. If you try to come in here you'll get more than I handed that stupid body-guard of yours!"

"All we want is a sample of your finger-prints," Tracy said quietly. "If you're really innocent, you can prove it in two minutes."

Lord's answer was a bullet that split the panel of the door an inch from Tracy's ear. Four more followed it in a crashing fusillade, but Killan's lightning grab at the first crash had yanked Tracy backward to the floor.

There was a hoarse cry from within, followed by the swift thud of retreating feet.

Inspector Fitzgerald's gun sent smashing thunder at the lock of the door. But it failed to blow out the jammed

mechanism. Killan threw his shoulder against the door and so did Butch. Their combined assault did the trick. The door went flat with them and Tracy and Fitz sprang over their prone bodies.

They were in an empty living-room with wide French windows that faced on the darkness of a flat terrace. The scream that halted them in mid-stride didn't come from the terrace. It sounded from somewhere in the rear of the apartment. It was knife-like in its horror, and knife-like in the way it dwindled into silence.

Tracy had heard that kind of ebbing scream only once before in his life. His scalp crawled at the memory. He had a swift mental picture of a poor lunatic crouched tensely on a stone ledge at the peak of a Fifth Avenue skyscraper. The man had jumped with that same ebbing shriek as police had grabbed vainly to save him from suicide.

Tracy raced through the apartment toward a rear bedroom. There was a half-filled suitcase on the floor. Clothing was scattered all over the bed. The window was wide open.

Far below on the roof of a fourth story cutback was a small mass that didn't move. He must have taken a desperate chance to escape along a ledge that extended dizzily toward another window. A shred of his sleeve was hanging from the steel hook used for the belts of window cleaners.

"He must have grabbed for the hook when he lost his balance," Killan said.

"Guilty as hell," Fitz said quietly.

His face was as pale as Tracy's but there was not a tremor in his big, bony frame.

In silence they descended in the private elevator. They went around to the front entrance of the building. There was no alarm out front as yet. Chauffeurs in the taxi line stared curiously, sensing trouble but not saying anything.

The fat over-rouged woman at the fourth floor rear had left her door conveniently open when she had rushed out to the hallway to faint. Fitz and Killan climbed out to the roof of the cutback.

One look from the window was enough for Tracy. The man himself lay face down, mutilated unrecognizably by the fall. But the impact had torn loose a white carnation from Lord's lapel. It lay in a darkish stain alongside the body, shredded and no longer white. Tracy stayed inside, a little sorry he'd eaten so much for dinner.

When Fitz climbed in again his hands were smudged with recording ink and he had a finger-print sample which he placed carefully in his wallet.

He grinned bleakly at Jerry's expression.

"A good cop has the soul of a louse, Jerry. Let's go over to Headquarters. These prints are about the only thing left of him."



TYPEWRITTEN memo lay on Fitzgerald's desk. It was from the finger-print expert who had phoned the indices of the gun-prints to London. The reply from London had come across ten minutes ago. Fitzgerald showed the memo to Tracy.

"Index of prints positively identify Hilliard's murderer as fugitive British criminal. Ronald Jordan, alias Harry Clifton, alias Richard Duke. Specialty rich women. Escaped custody after killing two constables. Believed to have reached America under forged passports. Photos follow. Extradition urgently desired.

Hanley."

Hanley was the finger-print man. Fitz's ring brought him downstairs from the bureau. He came in with brisk cheeriness.

"Forget about extradition. We've got a copper-riveted case right here. Bert Lord is the phony passport monicker. Two minutes with the guy will prove it. Have you picked him up?"

"You do it," Sergeant Killan said. "He dropped thirteen stories without a parachute."

"Suicide, eh?"

"He tried an outside get-away along a stone ledge while we were breaking down the door."

Fitzgerald opened his wallet and handed Hanley two sensitized sheets of paper with the record of the second and third fingers on Lord's right hand. He had taken two to make sure. Blood smears had ruined the first.

Hanley said, "Beautiful!" and meant it. He took the good sample and laid it alongside the print he had taken from the gun. With a metal-tipped stylus he pointed to the complicated pattern of loops and whorls.

"Lemme show you what a really pretty science this business of—"

He stopped suddenly, his face queerly puckered.

"Gawd!" he breathed. He laid down the stylus with a gentle slowness as though he were afraid it might break.

"What's the matter?" Fitzgerald asked.

"Our guy didn't do it."

"Huh?"

"The prints don't match. The guy who gunned Hilliard wasn't Bert Lord."

Stunned, Fitzgerald stared at the expert. "You just told us that the British police—"

"Sure. They said that the guy who used that Webley on Hilliard was Ronald Jordan, alias Harry Clifton, alias Richard Duke. But you can take my word he wasn't Bert Lord! I don't know why the hell the fool went out the window, but his prints show he didn't kill Hilliard. If you put me on the stand, I'll have to be a defense witness."

"Nice joke on Lord," Killan said tonelessly. "Looks like you'll have to dig us up another Englishman, Jerry."

Tracy was on his feet, clutching at the edge of Fitz's desk to steady himself.

"But Lord fired at us through the door; tried to kill me. Why'd he run? Why did he—"

"Take it easy, Jerry," Fitz said.

"Take it—hell!" His hand quivered

from his pocket and dropped a flattened slug and a wilted carnation on the desk. "Lord tried to wipe me out on the way to the broadcast tonight. He came back to Hilliard's to get the gun. He slugged Butch over the head. Why? Why, if he didn't kill Hilliard, did he kill himself?"

"They're still not his prints," Hanley said. "Don't blame me."

Butch stirred massively in his chair, his big fists clenched. "If any of you suckers are trying to say that Jerry is responsible for—"

Nobody paid any attention to him.

"Lord said he was being framed," Tracy faltered. "I heard him yell that much through the door before he lost his head and—"

"Skip it, Jerry," Fitz said. "He was running from the cops, not you. You were just along for the ride. You know that, Jerry."

"I know that my broadcast tonight doomed Hilliard. I know that Bert Lord fell thirteen stories—and turns out to be innocent." He took a deep, quivering breath. "If you boys don't mind, I think I'll go home."

"Yeah. Do that," Fitz said gruffly.

Tracy wasn't aware of Butch's presence alongside him till they reached the street. Butch called a taxi and Tracy seemed suddenly to wake up.

"Beat it, Butch. I don't need you."

Butch took one look at his employer's tightly wrinkled face. There were times when argument was a waste of breath. This was one of them.

"O. K. Jerry. Don't make it too late. I'll wait up for you."

Tracy didn't answer. Butch got in the cab and drove away. The *Daily Planet's* ace columnist flagged another taxi. He went up Fifth Avenue to 59th and made a slow circle through the park. He thought of a million things about Hilliard's murder, but the core of his thinking was always the same: the flattened, battered body of Bert Lord.

He snapped out of his mental haze when the taxi emerged again from the

park at 59th. He drove to the nearest drugstore and thumbed swiftly through the D's in a telephone book.

Ken Dunlap was an Englishman. Ken Dunlap had once been in love with the dark-eyed Mrs. Hilliard. When she had married the tobacco tycoon there had been no pretense of love on her part. Suppose that Dunlap and not Lord was the sleek Ronald Jordan alias everything else that the British police had let slip out of England. The scandal tip about Lord had come from a woman using a disguised voice on the wire. Betty had been a grade A radio actress when she signed off to marry Hilliard. If Betty Hilliard had planned for Dunlap to kill her husband and split a fortune between them, the affair between Lord and Hilliard's adopted daughter was a perfect smoke screen.

Betty's refusal to tell where she had been when she left the house might be a deliberate bit of cleverness. A belated infidelity alibi from Dunlap would smirch her and save her at the same time. The cynical columnist's section of Tracy's brain handed him a headline: *Dirt for Dough's Sake.*



KEN DUNLAP'S apartment house was on Park Avenue. It was one of those expensive stone hives in the Fifties, the sort from which news trickled like a perennial spring into Tracy's notebooks. The night doorman was a stooge on the Tracy payroll.

In two minutes Jerry learned that Dunlap had gone out alone around 7:30 and hadn't come back yet. The doorman had whistled Pete Malloy's cab from the corner hackstand and Dunlap had been driven uptown.

"You sure he's still away?"

The doorman grinned. "I'm sure enough to slip you a master key if you want to convince yourself."

"I won't go up, but slip me the key anyway."

He walked onward to the corner and spent ten dollars on Pete Malloy. The cabbie had taken Dunlap on an aimless ten-minute drive, and had dropped him finally at a west side corner about a quarter to eight. He was positive about the time and positive about the street.

Tracy blinked. The spot where Dunlap had alighted was a short block from the Hilliard home.

Tracy ducked into a whitewashed alley that led to the basement of the apartment house. The service elevator, untended at night, stood open and empty at the foot of the shaft. Tracy rode the car to the floor below Dunlap's and climbed the last flight, leaving the car's door jammed open in case he needed it for a quick scam.

He rang Dunlap's service bell and ducked into the shadow of the dark stairs. No one answered his ring. After a while, he opened the door quietly with his master key.

The apartment was in total darkness. Tracy tiptoed through the kitchen and pantry, went through a dining room. In the huge adjoining living-room, he snapped on the lights and began a quick, noiseless search. What he wanted was some small object which might reasonably contain a set of Dunlap's fingerprints.

He didn't see any personal object small enough that could be wrapped and slipped into his pocket.

He went into the bedroom and turned on a lamp. Almost the first thing he saw was a flat gold cigarette case lying on a night table alongside an extension telephone. He wrapped it carefully in his handkerchief and slid it into his pocket.

He was turning to put out the lamp when he heard the grate of a key in the apartment's front door.

Tracy never moved faster in his life. A click, and the bedroom went black. A swift dart across soundless rugs and the living-room lapsed into darkness.

Utterly unaware that the lights had been blazing a second earlier, Ken Dun-

lap walked quickly into his living-room and snapped on the wall switch.

The few seconds interval between the slam of the apartment door and the unwelcome arrival of Dunlap had enabled Tracy to melt noiselessly into the blackness of the bedroom. Trapped, he stood behind heavy velour curtains, watching his suspect.

Dunlap seemed to be as nervous as a cat and in a coldly vicious temper. He kept muttering a low-toned growl of profanity; but it was without emphasis, as if his mind was centered on something else. He had heavy shoulders and a broad, clean-shaven face.

Tracy heard him mutter: "Mustn't get the wind up, or we'll both be lost!"

The sudden ring of a telephone bell halted Dunlap in midstride. Tracy, aware of the phone set on the night table, stiffened behind his curtain. Then he realized that its bell was silent. It was merely an extension phone; the bell was ringing in the living-room.

Tracy tiptoed away from the curtain and lifted the duplicate phone with cringing care.

He heard the sharp bite of Dunlap's voice on the wire. "Who is it?"

"Betty."

"Right-o. What's up?"

"Ken, we've got to do something. Alice knows about the letters! And I don't trust Furman. That secretary has sharp eyes and big ears."

Dunlap swore. "Don't worry, sweet. I'll take care of them both if necessary."

"You'll have to risk coming here, Ken. I've got to see you. There was a nasty little columnist here from the *Daily Planet*. I think he overheard Alice telling me about the letters."

"I'll handle it. Now listen. . . ."

Tracy didn't wait for the rest. His only chance to get away unseen was to risk a sneak while Dunlap was still hunched tensely over the phone outside. He lowered his own instrument gently into its cradle.

Before he could take two steps there was a sudden rush of heavy feet. The

velvet curtain that screened the doorway of the dark bedroom was swished viciously aside. Light flooded the room.

Tracy blinked but Dunlap didn't. He stood there with fists knotted tightly, his voice ominously quiet.

"Cheerio, Mr. Tracy. You seem to be awfully clever at overhearing things. But not clever enough to hide a click on a busy wire."

"You didn't, by any chance, murder Bruce Hilliard tonight, did you, Mr. Dunlap?"

That stopped him. "You think I did?"

"You were there tonight after Betty Hilliard obligingly emptied the house for your arrival. I have two witnesses to prove you left here and went there."

"Right-o." Dunlap remained polite. "But unfortunately for your logic, I didn't go in. Hilliard was already dead on his study floor when I peered through the window."

"When was that?"

"A quarter of eight."

"It won't wash. Hilliard was still alive at eight-thirty. He phoned me right after my broadcast ended. Do you know Bert Lord?"

"We're fairly friendly," Dunlap said.

"Friendly enough to steal his gun?"

Dunlap exhaled faintly. "I begin to see your drift. Fingerprints, eh? Looking for samples in my apartment. That was bloody foolish of you."

Tracy's fist lashed out as Dunlap sprang. The blow didn't stop the headlong rush of the heavy-set Englishman. A heave jack-knifed Tracy backward. He tried to kick out with both feet but Dunlap was around him like an eel. Fingers closed on Tracy's windpipe. The pressure eased before Tracy lapsed into unconsciousness, but he lay utterly helpless with a red haze whirling before his bulging eyes.

Through the haze he could see Dunlap grimly examining the cigarette case he had found in Tracy's pocket. He also found the master key.

"So you sneaked in here with the connivance of the blasted doorman down-

stairs! Well, it won't do you a particle of good."

He hauled Tracy upright with one hand, anchoring him on swaying legs.

"If I weren't in such a hurry to get somewhere else, I'd give you what-for, my friend. As it is—"

Tracy saw the fist shoot upward in a powerful uppercut, but he was too groggy to roll his head. The blow caught him squarely under the chin. He could feel the hammering impact of every tooth in his head. Then he didn't feel anything. . .



HE CAME riding out of nothingness on long waves of nausea. It seemed as if someone had launched Tracy on a surfboard that raced

up and down the smooth chasms of endless waves. Flat on his face he held on desperately until he became confusedly aware that his fingers and his wide-open mouth were pressed against the soft texture of a rug.

He got up dizzily, clutched for a bedpost and fell over a chair. He felt weak and sick. He knelt with head hanging until the sickness reached its climax, then he felt better.

There was no sign of Dunlap in the apartment. Tracy glanced at his wrist watch. He had been unconscious over two hours.

He jumped to the telephone on the night table. He could get no answer from the operator. The line was dead. So was the phone in the living-room. Dunlap had done a neat job.

Tracy raced out the front door to the corridor and kept his finger jammed on the elevator button until the indicator began to move. To his relief the elevator was operated by his friend, the doorman.

The doorman gasped as he recognized the battered little columnist.

"Jerry! For Gawd's sake! Did Dunlap—!"

"Get this cage down quick! How come you're running it? Switchboard man off duty?"

"He went over to Madison Avenue for some coffee."

"Swell. I want to phone without any publicity."

"Jerry, you told me you weren't going up to his apartment. If I'd only known, I could have warned you when he came in."

"I know. It was a dumb stunt. I went in the back way after I spoke to the hackman at the corner. Did Dunlap hire the same cab this time?"

"No. He stopped a roller."

They had reached the street lobby. The doorman jumped to the deserted switchboard and plugged an outside wire.

"Police headquarters," Jerry growled. "Hello? Jerry Tracy! I want to talk to Inspector Fitzgerald or Sergeant Killan. Either one."

"Sorry, Jerry. They're both out right now on that Hilliard thing."

"Did they go back to the Hilliard home?"

"I don't think so. It was some other angle."

"Try all of the mid-town precincts. If you get 'em, tell 'em I'll be over at Hilliard's. Wait! Better tell 'em to give me a quick buzz before they start." He gave them the number.

"Anything hot?"

"Hot enough. I've got a hunch two more people are due to get the works tonight."

"Wow! O. K."

Tracy hung up and called the Hilliard number. All he could raise was a busy signal. Sweating, he waited and tried again. Buzz-buzz-buzz. . . . Every minute he waited here he was giving Dunlap additional time. And yet if he quit and raced for a cab, he was giving him still more time. He got two more busy signals before he cursed and ran out into the street.

The doorman's whistle brought him the night-hawk hackman from the cor-

ner. Tracy slammed in and went streaking uptown and across to the west side.

There were lights on in the Hilliard home, but Tracy's ring at the doorbell went unanswered. Racing across the dark grounds, Tracy found that the side window through which he had originally entered was still open. He squirmed over the sill and darted for Hilliard's study.

To his angry amazement Hilliard's butler was seated calmly in an easy chair, smoking a cigarette. There was no sign of the cop who had been left on guard—or of anyone else.

"Why the hell don't you answer the doorbell?"

Marcom said placidly, "The policeman told me to remain in this room and see that nothing was disturbed. After he went I thought I'd better not leave the room."

Tracy felt a chill of anxiety. He had heard Fitz tell that cop to remain on duty until relieved!

"When did the cop leave?"

"I don't know. I stepped into the hall to speak to him a moment ago and he wasn't there."

"Has a guy named Dunlap been here? Did he and the cop go away together?"

"No, sir. Mr. Dunlap arrived before that. The four of them—"

"What four?"

"Mr. Dunlap and Hilliard's secretary, Mr. Furman, went away with Mrs. Hilliard and Miss Hilliard. They all seemed very friendly, particularly the two women, which puzzled me, sir."

"Me, too," Tracy growled. "What happened?"

"There was talk about going to Mr. Hilliard's Long Island estate in order to avoid newspaper reporters. The policeman vetoed that. Then the front door bell rang and the policemen left me here."

The word "bell" reminded Tracy suddenly of the peculiar series of busy signals when he had tried to call Hilliard's home.

"Who's been using this phone?"

Marcom looked puzzled. "No one,

sir. There haven't been any calls."

Tracy noticed that a small screen had been shifted from its accustomed place and was standing in front of the telephone desk. He whisked it away and nodded with grim understanding. Someone had slyly disconnected the phone by lifting it from its cradle. He placed it back.

Tracy stood stiffly still, his brow wrinkled in thought. His preconceived suspicion of Bert Lord as Hilliard's murderer had long since vanished. There was the phone call which Tracy had received on his private line at the broadcasting studio from Bruce Hilliard. Remembering something that Ken Dunlap had told him sneeringly in his Park Avenue apartment, Tracy was coldly convinced that Hilliard had been dead when that alleged call of his had gone over the wire at 8:32. And if Hilliard was dead, only two people could possibly have made the phony call.

One of them was a woman, one a man. The realization of the man's identity made the hair crawl on Tracy's scalp. He did a sudden, seemingly illogical thing. He darted toward the radio over which Hilliard had been listening when he was shot to death. He examined the dial swiftly.

"Has anyone been near this machine?"

"No, sir," Marcom said.

"Come on! I want to have a look at the front door."

The rug in the entry was badly disarranged. On the polished boards of the exposed floor was a tell-tale drip of blood. Tracy followed the trail a few feet to a hall closet. When he wrenched open the door, the unconscious body of the missing policeman tumbled head-first out. He had been knocked cold, probably by brass knuckles, judging from the multiple abrasions across his bleeding temple.

Marcom uttered a terrified cry.

Tracy said, "Ah, shut up." The thing was too foolishly simple. The four of them had sneaked out the back door,

while a dumb butler sat like a fool in Hilliard's study and a cop stood jammed on unconscious feet in the hall closet.

The phone began to ring.

"Hello!"

A woman operator answered. She sounded angry. "Your instrument was off the hook. There's a call that's been blocked for five minutes. Are you Mr. Jerry Tracy?"

"Yes. Let's have it!"

Inspector Fitzgerald's crisp voice came on the wire. "I've been trying to get you, Jerry. What's wrong?"

"Plenty! Furman and Alice have gone to Hilliard's Long Island estate with Betty Hilliard and Dunlap. The trip was ostensibly taken to avoid reporters, but I suspect it concerns certain letters which Betty wrote to Dunlap after her marriage."

Tracy's words raced. "Fitz, we've got to get there fast, or there'll be another murder! A double one this time!"

"I'll pick you up with a police car that'll do eighty."

"Swell. Only phone the police air base first. Tell 'em to have an amphibion waiting. The car'll do as far as North Beach. We'll need the plane to make up the time we've lost."

"I'll handle it!" Fritz growled.



NORTH BEACH AIRPORT whisked away like a flat, black pancake in the uncertain light of dawn. The police pilot did not climb very high. Banking, he gunned the amphibion into bullet-level flight. Fitzgerald and Sergeant Killan were packed uncomfortably together, with Jerry Tracy crouched between their knees.

The hills and coves of Long Island's north shore raced swiftly astern. Tracy stared ahead through the moonlit darkness, watching for the narrow entrance to the inlet where Hilliard's country home was located. Speed sang in his blood. The wild automobile race north-

ward through Manhattan and across the Triborough Bridge—that was nothing compared to this!

Suddenly he pointed. A shaggy headland was shouldering the darkness straight ahead.

The plane curved outward from the shore, banking and slackening its speed in preparation for a water landing. The pilot was taking no chance with the cove entrance beyond the headland. He planned to taxi through on the surface of the water.

But a yell from Jerry Tracy changed the pilot's mind. Fitz, too, was pointing. A lengthening streak of foam showed on the surface of the water where the cove joined the sound. A dark speedboat was fleeing eastward toward Greenport and the open sea.

It was a fast streamlined craft with a knife bow, but it was no match for the police flying boat. The amphibion overhauled it with the ease of a dropping hawk. It roared less than twenty feet above the cruiser. Tracy, peering, saw the blurred faces of Betty Hilliard and Ken Dunlap.

Betty seemed to be tied hand and foot. Dunlap was free. He was springing to the engine controls, slowing the boat's mad speed. The amphibian curved into the wind and landed with a shower of spray. Its momentum carried it alongside the drifting boat.

Sergeant Killan risked a ducking with a wide, reckless leap. He was on his feet instantly in the rocking craft, his gun pointed at the tense figure of Dunlap. There was a fishing knife in Dunlap's hand.

"Drop it!" Killan rasped.

The knife clattered. Killan scooped it up. Fitzgerald and Tracy sprang aboard and the seaplane began to drift away from the rocking boat.

"Cuff him, Sarge," Fitz growled.

There was a quick scream from Betty Hilliard. "Let him alone, you fools! He's innocent. Ken, tell them what happened, quick! Untie me, someone!"

Tracy loosened her bonds. He didn't

have much trouble with the rather hastily knotted cords that fettered her wrists and ankles. Fitz was listening to Dunlap, watching him like a hawk. His story sounded too fast and too phony.

He accused Furman and Alice Hilliard of attempting murder. They had, he declared, lured him and Betty to the Long Island estate with a promise to return certain missing love letters that had passed between Dunlap and Hilliard's young wife. Furman and Alice had taken them to Hilliard's boat house at the edge of the cove. Before Dunlap was aware of treachery, he and Betty were bound hand and foot and tossed into Hilliard's speedboat. The rudder was lashed tightly, the engine started, and the boat was sent racing into the Sound to be blown up as soon as the delayed spark of a fuse reached the gas tank.

Killan said, incredulously, "A fuse? An explosion?"

"Where's the fuse?" Fitzgerald snapped.

"Overboard," Dunlap said slowly, his eyes watchful. "I rolled to the knife just in time. Guess they overlooked that fishing knife in the dark. It was under a seat. I cut my bonds, tossed the damned fuse over the side, a few seconds before your plane showed up."

Killan said dryly, "Funny you didn't draw any blood with those quick knife cuts."

"He's telling the truth," Betty Hilliard cried. "Furman and Alice wanted it to appear as if we blew up accidentally in a guilty attempt to flee. They must have been in cahoots with Lord."

Fitzgerald looked at the *Daily Planet's* little columnist. Tracy's dim smile was enigmatic.

"Lord didn't kill Hilliard," he said. "I've known that for some time. Hilliard was shot twice because a man and a woman murdered him. Each wanted a hold on the other, so each fired at him, using Lord's stolen gun. Then, you see, with them both witnessing the other's shot, neither could ever talk. We'd better get back to that boat house."

"You won't find them," Betty cried. "They're miles away by this time."

Dunlap didn't say anything. Tracy jumped to the speedboat's engine and started it. Fitz yelled an order across the black water to the drifting seaplane. As the boat raced back to the entrance of the cove, the seaplane began to taxi slowly in its wake, dipping along like an unwieldy gull.

The boathouse was a two-story wooden building on the left side of the cove. A light was burning on the lower floor. It was the only light visible in the darkness. Hilliard's country home, perched high on the cliff, was black and formless among the trees.

Tracy switched off his engine and allowed the speedboat to ground on a shelving beach. He and Fitz hurried noiselessly toward the partly opened door of the boathouse.

A cautious glance inside made them both stiffen. Walter Furman and Alice Hilliard were lying close together on the floor. There were handkerchiefs thrust into their mouths; their wrists and ankles were tied with lengths of fishing cord. Their faces were livid with terror.

Fitz started to spring forward, but Tracy caught him in a tight grip and yanked him soundlessly back out of sight. He had seen something that Fitz hadn't. The knob of a rear door was turning slowly! Someone behind the boathouse was about to make a stealthy entrance.

A small window allowed Tracy and Fitz a hidden view of the interior. The back door was wider now, although no one was visible in the blackness beyond. On the floor Walter Furman was threshing furiously.

A man bounded suddenly into the lighted room. There was a gun in his hand and it swung toward the pair on the floor.

Fitz's yell of amazement startled the murderer. He was a man alongside whose smashed body Fitzgerald had knelt only an hour or so earlier to take fruitless fingerprints.

Bert Lord! The man who had jumped or fallen thirteen stories.

Lord's gun muzzle jerked toward the window. His shot and Fitz's roared simultaneously. Glass showered Tracy as Lord's bullet grazed his scalp. Fitz's bullet missed the whirling killer's chest, but it drilled through the palm of Lord's outthrust left hand.

The stairs to the upper floor were closer to Lord than the rear door. He raced upward. That was a mistake. Fitz was inside the front door like a lean-limbed tornado, pumping lead.

He fired four thunderous shots and one of them drilled Lord's back below his shoulder blades. Lord clung with one hand to the wooden bannister, trying to aim his gun muzzle downward toward Fitz. To Tracy it seemed like a million years, but it was really not more than three or four seconds.

Lord toppled almost leisurely over the bannisters. He struck on his head and rolled over. His neck stayed twisted at an unnatural angle. He looked as if he were slyly peeping over his shoulder at the rigid figures of Tracy and the police inspector.

Fitz said huskily, "That's one for the book. He falls thirteen stories and doesn't get killed. Then he flops six feet over a bannister and breaks his neck."

"Only, of course," Tracy said, "he didn't fall thirteen stories. He pushed someone out. When you have time to get an autopsy done, you'll sure as hell find out it was his poor valet. I've heard he had one the same height and size as he was."

Tracy breathed relievedly. "I'm glad I didn't scare him into suicide. He suspected we'd get a line on him from Scotland Yard where he's wanted for murder. So he undoubtedly bashed in his valet's head, dressed the body in his clothes—even to the flower—and tossed him out the window. He knew he'd have time to escape before the poor, smashed body could ever be identified and that, in the meantime, we'd think it was he."



DUNLAP and Betty Hilliard came in, herded by Killan. On the floor the bound figures of Alice and Furman had stopped writhing. Both couples were watching Tracy, who kept staring at the dead Lord with a bleak smile.

"Lord shot at me through the penthouse door, his scream at the window, was a bluff," Tracy said thoughtfully. "After Lord shoved out his valet, he jumped calmly into his bedroom closet. When we raced downstairs to view the mangled body of the valet he'd killed, Lord made a quick sneak. . . . Have you still got those prints from the murder gun?"

Fitz nodded. He smeared Lord's dead fingers lightly with fountain pen ink and pressed them gently against a sheet of paper. Then he compared the result with the prints he carried from the Webbley revolver.

"Check," he said. "A perfect match."

Tracy shook his head.

"It's not as simple as that, Fitz. Lord was framed."

"Then why did he fake his own death?"

"The prints answer that," Tracy said. "Bert Lord, if we'd caught him, would've been extradited to England and been hanged. Hence his desperate alibi at the penthouse window. But he didn't kill Hilliard! And he wasn't the man who ambushed me on my way to the broadcast studio tonight. Why should Lord, a clever crook, have been dumb enough to drop his well known white carnation where Butch and I would find it?"

Tracy turned suddenly toward Ken Dunlap. "You admit you went to Hilliard's house tonight. At a quarter of eight, you said. Three quarters of an hour before he was talking to me on the phone."

"Hilliard was dead when I saw him," Dunlap said calmly. "The back door was unlocked. Betty was gone. He

husband was dead. That's the truth."

"Why did you go there at all?"

"None of your damned business!"

"I'll tell you," Betty Hilliard said wearily. "Ken came because I love him. He wanted to ask my husband to permit a divorce so that we could marry. I phoned Ken and begged him not to come, afraid of my husband's violent temper. But Ken insisted. So I got rid of the butler and sneaked out to intercept Ken. I—I couldn't find him."

Fitz nodded grimly to Killan and the two cops moved closer to Dunlap. Tracy began to talk in a quiet, even voice.

"Hilliard was killed by a man and woman about 7:30 with Lord's gun. The gun was left to incriminate Lord. Alice even tried to make me think she was shielding Lord, by trying to keep the gun out of sight. The man who shot Hilliard then rushed downtown, bought a white carnation and took a shot at me, further involving Lord. Lord suspected the double-cross when he showed up at the studio and I accused him of the ambush. He raced to Hilliard's house, after a quick trip to his penthouse to find his revolver missing. He was the guy who tried to steal his own gun from me in the darkness—and failed."

"Lord knew, too late, what he was up against. So he faked his own death to make his fade-out easy. I should've suspected about his valet because I once wrote an item in my column about the town's best-dressed valet who could wear his master's old clothes. That was Lord's man. Anyway, Lord dared not tell the truth to the cops about the murderess and her boy friend, because to do so would be to hand himself over to British justice. The killers realized at once what Lord had done. But they, too, had to keep mum about his fake death or else disclose the fact that they had framed him."

"Lord was hanging around the Hilliard home when Ken Dunlap arrived in response to the call from Betty. I was in Dunlap's apartment when he got that call. Betty had already made a tearful

appeal to Alice about the letters which Alice had found. The result was that a truce was patched between the two women. Lord knocked out the cop on duty, but he was too late for his real revenge. The two couples had already started for Hilliard's Long Island place. Lord followed—for revenge. He'd lost everything. The rest is obvious."

"But," Inspector Fitzgerald's voice sounded dazed, "it was Alice Hilliard and Furman whom Lord tried to kill."

"That's right," Tracy said.

"You mean that Furman and not Dunlap—"

"I mean," Tracy said quietly, "that you've got your killers already tied up on the floor here, in fake knots of their own making. Hilliard was killed by his adopted daughter and a crooked secretary who happens also to be Alice's lover."

Sergeant Killan said dully, "Then all that nutty stuff about the motorboat and the burning fuse was true?"

Tracy nodded. "Furman's a good psychologist. He figured that if the explosion didn't blow Betty and Dunlap to smithereens, their story would be too fishy to believe. That's why he played safe with the cords and gag. That's also probably why he didn't search the boat and find the fishing knife."

Walter Furman lay very still on the floor alongside Alice. He had spat out his gag. His voice was scornful.

"You've forgotten my alibi."

"You haven't any. You had enough time after you killed Hilliard to make your fake ambush of me, drop the carnation, and go to meet Nick White at his near-by hotel. Alice met me at the broadcast building with a fake tearful appeal to build her alibi. You thought you were both in the clear, because you intended to make it seem that Hilliard was still alive two minutes after my broadcast ended."

"How do you know he wasn't?" Furman said huskily.

"No one touched his radio set from the moment the body was discovered. Hilliard never missed one of my broad-

casts. Yet his dial was tuned at another station. In other words, he was killed *before I came on the air*. He couldn't have heard my squib and, therefore, didn't summon me to his house. You did that!"

"Prove it, wise guy."

"Easily," Tracy said steadily. "My studio phone is unlisted. I use it to get last minute news flashes from my private secretary. Only two other people know that number. Hilliard, who was already dead—and his confidential secretary, Walter Furman."

"I really ought to have a motive."

"I can guess at one. That check Hilliard gave Alice this afternoon for \$50,000. It might have been forged by—"

"No." Hilliard's wife spoke suddenly. "My husband signed it. He told me about it. It was a final gift to Alice in lieu of any share in his estate in the event she married Lord. He had already changed his will, cutting her off. Then Alice tried to blacken my character. My husband threatened to stop payment on the check. I heard him tell Furman to notify the bank in the morning. He wrote a notation on the stub. Make Furman tell you what he did with the book."

Furman's hand moved like a streak of lightning from beneath his prone body. He had slyly released his hidden right hand from the loosely twisted cords. As he heaved to his knees a pistol glittered.

"Quick!" Alice screamed harshly. "I can take it! Let's go this way!"

Fitz tried to clutch at Furman but he twisted like an eel. He leaned swiftly toward Alice. She had knelt to face him, and she took without a quiver the bullet that he sent crashing into her breast. A second later the smoking muzzle spat flame into Furman's temple.

He fell in a flat huddle. There was a ghastly smile on Alice's pale face. She had pitched forward across the body of her lover.

"She took it, all right," Fitz said.

"Some women can take anything—except decency," Tracy said.

His lips tightened and there was silence. What else was there to say?

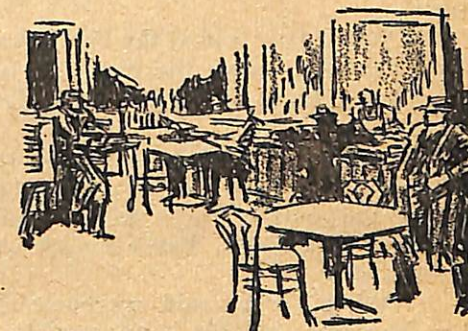
● BULLET SONG ●

By EDGAR PANGBORN

Slugs of justice speed their way to racketeers' hearts



HE large, moon-faced man climbed out of his roadster and padded across the dark street with a can of sardines in his left hand. November wind naggd at his overcoat, flinging snowflakes at his round cheeks and rushing away across the city with a whining laugh. Behind Tom Paradine's preoccupied eyes there was music, and he hummed, scarcely knowing he did so—small broken music like the sound of someone trying out



the lower register of a cello in another room.

He pushed through the revolving door of Hanifin's Bar and Grill, and slouched at the bar. He shook the can of sardines he held in his hand, sighed and said, "Damn!" Then, "Beer, Pete," and dropped the sardines in his overcoat pocket.

The young face behind the bar looked sick; Paradine forgot the music in his mind and added: "What's the matter, Pete?"

The bartender's high forehead was wrinkled and there were dark rings around the youthful gray eyes that would not meet Paradine's. Pete's mouth was tight-drawn.

"Nothing," Pete said mechanically; but Paradine saw his hand tremble at the tap.

"Without beer," said Paradine, "nobody could be a music critic. Do you know I lead a dog's life, Pete? Always writing things about music, as if anybody gave a damn. Say, is Ed Hanifin anywhere around?"

"No. The boss is away for a day or two." Pete studied a spot on his apron; said with uncalled-for hostility: "I don't know anything about music . . . Did you want to see Ed?"

"No." Paradine was mildly offended, and bored. "Just wanted to let my hair down and cry on his shoulder. You aren't old enough to know about such things."

One of the two other customers was sleepy drunk, nodding over an empty stein; the other read a newspaper at one of the tables, but Paradine glimpsed his eyes above it, and they were keen, cold eyes, on a slant; a hook-nosed man, sal-low and hard and watchful. Pete stared unhappily at this man.

Heavy trouble had stricken old Ed Hanifin recently. In Paradine's private knowledge of that, in the stillness of the bar on a Sunday afternoon, in the tension of Pete Holden and the dark alertness of the hook-nosed man, Paradine

sensed something ugly. The room smelt of danger.

But the trouble came in from outside, on dragging feet. A man walked in uncertainly, and leaned on the bar, putting both manicured hands on it palms down, so that rings on his shivering fingers glittered. A small black-eyed man, neat and slim. He said:

"'Isk—ss—'isky straight." Then in a frail ghost of a voice: "Oh, my God. . ."

Pete made no move to get the drink. His young scared eyes bored in, hard, angry, pleading, still trying to dig something from the hook-nosed man behind the newspaper.

On the floor under the newcomer's overcoat Paradine saw a drop of blood, and another splashed beside it. One ringed finger moved on the bar in a wet beer-stain; drew out the liquid uncertainly on the bright wood, making the capital letter E, and two more figures. An East Side address. Paradine could read it.

Pete's arm swept across the address, wiping it away. The hook-nosed man behind the newspaper, without moving, spoke three words: "Watch it, Ferenczi."

The black-eyed newcomer turned slowly, hands still palms down on the bar. The door swished, and a little sound came from that direction, like the pop of a champagne bottle. The black-eyed man jumped; said: "Look here, now—won't stand for that. . . ." He fell then in slow motion, and lay face up on the floor, choked once and was quiet.

The hook-nosed man stood up gradually, both his hands in plain sight holding his newspaper.

Paradine had not seen the one who fired the silenced shot; had only heard the door, and glimpsed a dark thing moving away in snow-spotted blackness. He hurled himself through the doorway and ran down the street after a lurching shadow that vanished around the next corner.

The street was crowded; the killer could be any one of the dozens who were

passing. Paradine murmured that East Side address and added: "None of your business, Tom Paradine; but . . ."

He walked back to his car and sat at the wheel, watching. Rubbernecks had already gathered outside the big window and Paradine could see Pete Holden talking frantically into the phone. He would be calling the police. If the police wanted to talk to Tom Paradine, they knew where to find him. Paradine shrugged, and drove to a mean street—on the East Side. He found the address that had been written in death; it was a four-story brownstone, peeling, its windows boarded up except for the top floor, where jagged holes gaped from dirty windows.

It looked deserted, but from within there was faint confused sound. Paradine stepped down into the basement areaway and pressed himself into the deepest shadow. He heard stumbling footsteps and a sound like someone choking, trying to speak. Hands fumbled at the latch of the iron grille door and pulled it open. A girl stepped through, holding out her hands in front of her. Her face was distorted, the mouth a dark O of terror.

Paradine stepped out of the shadow; said, "Molly Hanifin."

Her outstretched hands touched his vest before she knew he was there. She stopped, swaying, her eyes focusing on him without recognition or understanding. Paradine took hold of her hands; said:

"Molly Hanifin. Ed Hanifin's own daughter, sure enough. Long while since I saw you last. You're in a pretty tough spot. Can I help? Tried to see your dad tonight, but he wasn't there. He's with you, I suppose?"

"What? Who—"

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"You're the police? Go ahead, then. Burn me. I don't care any more."

"Hell," said Paradine. "I'm not police Molly." He kept hold of one of her hands; took the can of sardines from his

overcoat pocket and looked at it glumly. "It's this, Molly. I bought this at a delicatessen, and they didn't give me a key to open the damn thing. Can't open it without a key. So when I heard that you might be up here, why, I thought maybe you'd know how to open it, you with all your experience at the Bar and Grill and all that, so I came along."

"I remember you, Mr. Paradine." Her tension relaxed, and she trembled, swayed toward him, clutched his shoulders for support. "You're kind," she said, "to talk nonsense while I—please help me. No, you've got to go away! You *can't* mix into this."

"I thought I'd hang around a while. Where's your dad, Molly? He wasn't at his bar."

"He's dead," the girl said thinly, on the verge of hysterics. "He's been murdered. You can't mix into this. The police want me. Two days they've been looking for me. They think I killed Dutch Tiemann. They arrested me, and Tiemann's gangsters snatched me away from them. I got away from them too. They're both after me now. You can't come into this. I want you to go. They're hunting me."

Paradine looked over her head at the gaping basement door, then down at a little glimpse of red hair under her hat. She was a tall girl, beautifully made. She didn't want him to go. That was only courage finding speech. He said:

"I know that. I know how Tiemann died. I was talking with Captain Shapiro only two days ago."

"You can't mix into this," whispered Molly Hanifin. "My father's dead. He's dead."

Paradine glanced over his shoulder. A square figure in blue was strolling up the block on the other side. Paradine shoved the girl gently through the basement doorway; closed the door silently behind them.

"Where is he, Molly?"

Her hand guided him down a musty hall to the rear of the basement. The total

darkness and the silence were heavy things.

"What is this place, Molly?"

"It's empty," she whispered. "It's one of the houses my father owned. Condemned. Fire laws or something. They're going to tear it down." She stopped at the end of the hall. Her voice was no longer a whisper, but had the growing sharpness of anguish:

"Mr. Paradine—this room here. Put out your hand—you'll find the door. Have you got matches? I can't go in. I can't. I'll wait for you here. Oh, don't go. Don't leave me. Please help me. I can't go in."

"Don't get hysterical, Molly."

"I won't. I won't." There was returning sanity in her voice. Paradine struck a match and, holding it high, stepped into the room.

Ed Hanifin had been a big man, big in many ways. Newspapermen thought so when he was in the ring; they thought so after he sprained his back and couldn't fight any more, because he never whined about it. They thought he was pretty big when he started Hanifin's Bar and Grill and made it a place after their own hearts until Prohibition put the lid on it. Even then Hanifin stayed big: he was no bootlegger; his place became just a hash-joint; he made it a good hash-joint and let it go at that. And when the great drouth ended, Ed Hanifin came into a belated second blooming, and the new generation of scribblers loved him as the older one had done.

He was big now, in death.

He sat propped against a corner of the bare room, and his large gray eyes staring nowhere had so much peace and dignity, it was as though they asked you not to mind the hideous hole in his chest through which his blood had spilled. Ed Hanifin was a gentleman, and when someone had shot him through the heart he had died like one, accepting the inevitable, while his great body refused to be either pathetic or grotesque.

There was nothing in that small square

room except death. No furniture; no signs of occupation; the single window was boarded up. Paradine returned to the hall, and his second match showed him Molly's face, wet-cheeked, quiet.

"Who did that?" he asked. "You know."

"If I knew—whoever did it would die. I'd live long enough to see to that."

"You two were hiding out here?"

"I was. *He* never ran away from anything. He brought me here and stayed here to take care of me. I had to go out, to get food for us. I was less conspicuous than he was, with his white hair and a head taller than anybody else. He stayed under cover just so as not to give me away."

"Maybe three hours ago I got back with some food. We'd fixed up a room upstairs. I went up there; didn't find him, so I waited for him. He went out too, after dark, two or three times. He wanted to do—something, for me. Never mind what. I waited for him a long time. I got frightened. Finally I began to look, here in the house. I found him. Then I ran out front. If I knew who'd done it—"

"It won't bring Ed back to have the State burn you for murder."

"They will anyhow," she said, "for Tiemann's murder. They found my hand-bag up at his place, in Tiemann's hand," said Molly Hanifin.

"The cops didn't give that to the papers," said Paradine. "They didn't tell about the mob snatching you away, either, though it should have been front page. I suppose the cops are sensitive about such things. That's the impression I got, talking with Captain Shapiro."

"Why don't you go?" said Molly. "I'm wanted for murder. You can't mix into it. You've been kind. You helped me; kept me from going to pieces entirely. God knows, you've done enough. I want you to go."

Paradine said, "Did you kill Tiemann?"

"No."

There was a banging at the iron grille

door. Paradine said, "You've got to get out of here. Where're the stairs?"

A hard official voice barked:

"Open up there! Don't stall, Hanifin. Police. Open up!"

"Here!" Molly choked, tugged at Paradine's hand. They ran up the creaking flight to the pitch darkness of the first floor. The basement door rattled violently.

"Open up, Ed Hanifin! We know all about it. The back's covered; you can't lam out of it. Want us to break it down? Get sense, Hanifin."

"They want him too?" muttered Paradine, as they ran up, flight after flight.

"No, no! They're after *me*. They must've been tipped off that he was with me."

The basement door slammed inward.



N THE roof the wind flung snow in their faces. Molly had guided Paradine this far, but on the roof she stared around her, lost and confused. There was an unbroken stretch of six four-story houses, and then a ten-foot drop to the roof of a three-story building near the corner. Paradine let down his six-foot bulk over the edge, dropped the remaining four feet and held up his arms.

Molly jumped. Paradine caught her, eased her down, and ran to the front of the roof, staring over into the street. He saw the friendly red eye of his roadster at the curb below.

Molly said, "Fire-escape?"

"No good. Trap us in the back yard."

Paradine strode to a square of skylight. "This'll be somebody's skylight bedroom, I think," said Paradine, and drew up his foot. "I love other people's bedrooms," and his heel crashed down, splintering the frosted glass with shattering noise and powdery upheaval of snow. Paradine flung himself down at once, thrusting his arm through the break; he found the

fastening and jerked the skylight up on snarling hinges. He swung over into black uncertainty, hung on the edge of the frame a moment and then let himself go with knees relaxed, landing on the floor without losing his balance.

Someone squawked. There was the padding of bare feet, and a harsh overhead light flared on. Paradine looked into the empty face of a gayly pajamaed young man.

"Son, you'll just have to ignore this."

The young man said, "But, wha—"

"All clear, Molly! Let yourself down."

Paradine caught her waist, breaking the force of the drop. The young man in pajamas was waving one fist, digging with the other at his eyes; Paradine put four fingers on his chest and shoved. The young man sat down.

Paradine snatched open the door, turned:

"If you wear pajamas like that," he snarled, "you've got to expect this sort of thing."

Paradine ripped out the key, hustled Molly through the door and locked it from the outside. They ran down the two flights of stairs, and out the front door of the lodging house. Molly Hanifin had not spoken; her teeth were digging at her upper lip. In the hallway, Paradine said: "Easy now. Coat collar up, hat down, and don't hurry."

He guided her to his car and bundled her in; neither of them looked up the street at that other house. As he put the car in gear and slid way from the curb, Paradine laughed at his chest and said:

"Only a couple of days ago Captain Shapiro was trying to tell me I was too old to run around the way I do."

"He's the one who arrested me and tried to make me say I'd killed Dutch Tiemann—before I was allowed to see a lawyer or anything. He kept saying, even if Tiemann was a racketeer and a louse, murder was murder. I got to thinking maybe I *had* killed Tiemann. He got me so I didn't know where I was or what I was doing . . . It *was* my hand-bag, you

know. I had been there to see Tiemann that night. And Captain Shapiro—oh!”

“I had a notion,” Paradine said, “that Shapiro didn’t do things that way. Thought he was usually decent. Back-room technique, huh?”

Molly stared straight ahead, watching the white street they traveled.

“And then,” Paradine said, “the mob turned up fresh and full of ideas when you were on your way from the precinct station to the court-house, and scattered lead around, and got you loose, shooting a police driver. He died before they got him to the hospital, by the way. A whole lot of fight about one girl. And now I’ve got you under my wing.” He pressed down on the gas. “Look back when I turn this corner. That car’s followed us for two turns.”

Molly stared through the rear window. “Yes; they’re following. Let me out. I can’t drag you into this.”

“Duck down now. That’s it.”

“But you’ve got to let me out!”

“And don’t talk so much. Try to be a little different from most women, Molly. Please.”

Paradine stepped up the motor, shooting across town. The other car followed.

“Stay down, Molly, way down.”

“You can’t run away from the police like this, just for me.”

“They aren’t police,” said Paradine. “More likely friends of the late Dutch Tiemann. Must’ve tailed me uptown and hung around in their quiet way. Of course, I ought to let you out, Molly. Just put you out on the pavement, and drive around the block and come back to see how you look all full of holes. You’re a damned fool, Molly. Damn it, I like this. Haven’t felt this young in twenty—ah! That was business.”

The rear-vision mirror had shattered, and a coughing noise rose above the shouting of the motors. Paradine swung his car around an El pillar, took the center of the street again, and then darted around a corner. From behind him he

heard a sickening crash and a yell of pain. He braked sharply, jumped out and ran a few steps.

What was left of a long red sedan clung to one of the pillars of the El, wheels spinning slowly and more slowly. A human thing twisted on the pavement; a Tommy gun was within reach of the thing’s no longer dangerous hand. A man in blue was running toward the mess from the next block down. Paradine got back in his car. Molly was climbing out the other side, pressing her hand over her mouth. Paradine pulled her back roughly and drove away. He said: “We’ll go home now. I need a drink.”



FROM PARADINE closed the door of his bachelor apartment behind Molly and shook himself like a big dog; he dropped the can of sardines on the mantel.

“I’ll have to leave you alone a while, Molly. I’ve got to go out visiting. You’ll have to give me your word you won’t take a run-out on me.”

Molly stared at him. “I give you my word,” she said. “But I still wish—”

Paradine smiled. He turned away, humming under his breath; went to the kitchenette and mixed two highballs. Into one of them he poured a little white powder. When he came back with the drinks Molly was crying silently.

“What’s that you’re humming?” she asked, trying to brighten up.

Paradine set down the drink beside her. “That? Some of the world’s greatest music. I heard it this afternoon, and wrote my little piece about it in time for tomorrow’s paper, as if it mattered the fraction of a damn, what a music critic thinks about Brahms’ *German Requiem*. I’m tremendously unimportant, Molly. I got interested in running around with the cops and playing unofficial hell and all that sort of crack-pot activity because I realized a few years ago just how unimportant I was. I had to be something,

to make myself feel big occasionally. You see, once upon a time I thought I was a musician myself.”

“What are the words you were humming?” Molly asked.

“Well, in English: ‘Make me to know the measure of my days on earth, to consider my frailty, that I must perish.’”

Molly Hanifin turned her face away quickly.

“I’m sorry,” said Paradine. “No, I’m not sorry. Don’t brood, Molly. Why, after a while you’ll simply be glad to remember that Ed Hanifin lived and died like the good man he was . . . No; writing bromides about music isn’t much fun any more. So, after grinding out my little column to report that Johannes Brahms was really quite a musician in his way, why, I went to Hanifin’s Bar and Grill and had a drink.”

“Was Pete there?”

“Pete was there,” said Paradine slowly. “Another man too, came in. His name, I understand, was Ferenczi.” Molly’s face gave no sign of knowing the name. “A little dapper man with rings on his fingers. And still another man was watching things from behind a newspaper. I didn’t like him. A parrot-nose guy, with a nasty pair of eyes. Well, Ferenczi spelled out the address of that place where I found you; seemed to be doing it for Pete’s benefit, and didn’t want the parrot beak to horn in on it. Ferenczi was in a pretty bad way, Molly. He was bleeding and then only a minute or two after he’d come in, somebody slid through the front door with a silenced gun and finished the job.”

Molly’s wide-eyed stare was pure pain. “Ferenczi? I don’t know—”

“Ferenczi’s dead. I saw that. I chased the killer and lost him in the crowd. Thought I’d look up the address on the chance it’d be interesting. It was. Isn’t it time I had the whole story, Molly? No; don’t drink that just yet. I’ll be honest, I put a bit of sleeping powder in your drink. I want you to sleep. But first,

how about telling me the story, Molly Hanifin?”

“The story?” she said.

“Yes. Or should I tell you? Dutch Tiemann was a louse. He worked the protection rackets for all he could, with a bit of blackmail on the side, and maybe half a dozen other things. I knew him slightly. I know lots of queer fish. I think I can guess why he was killed—he was too loose around the mouth. So last Wednesday morning the charwoman found him spread around his apartment with your hand-bag in his fist and his safe rifled, and your finger-prints all over. Lots of people who could have done it, of course . . . A few days ago, someone told me that a young guy was trying to muscle in on him. A young guy called Pete Holden.”

“No!” Molly jumped up, hot-eyed. “He was not. Pete Holden isn’t in the rackets and never was. Whoever told you that was lying.”

“Sit down, honey. Please. Do you know who it was, told me?”

“Whoever did was lying.” But Molly sat down again. “He—I know Pete. It just isn’t so. Who told you that?”

“Tiemann himself,” said Paradine. “Eight days ago. Tiemann was a loose-talking slob, after a few shots. I ran into him in a saloon. He always thought I was a joke; funniest thing in town. He was full, and unbuttoned his mouth. Nothing anybody could use in court. I remember I said, ‘Well, Tiemann, how’s vice, crime and corruption?’ and he said, ‘If it ain’t Saint Cecilia in long pants!’ and we had that kind of thing back and forth a while, and pretty soon he was crying into the beer and saying he knew he’d wind up with a dose of lead and what the hell was the good of anything and why couldn’t he go home and see if his old mother remembered him.”

“After a while a little parrot-nosed guy came in and walked him off more or less right side up. Sure; the same parrot-nose I was telling you about before, the one I saw at Hanifin’s tonight. But before that

happened, Tiemann had been saying to me: 'Paradine, that damn kid, Holden, thinks he can buy out my trade. He's a young man that wants to get ahead. When I turn up on a cold slab, you and your flatfoot pals can just remember what I said about Pete Holden.'"

"Pete," Molly said, "Pete Holden is my husband."

"Well, Molly, that's quite a beginning. Go on from there."

She twisted her hands together; forced out each word:

"Dad took on Pete, two years ago. Sort of partnership; Pete put up a little money and we made some improvements. I—we got married. I was crazy about him. I *am*. He's all right. He is *not* mixed up in the rackets. Tiemann was lying to you, just wanted to get Pete into more trouble, by saying that to you. . . .

"It was about two years ago that Tiemann's gang started putting pressure on us. Dad had made a sort of fresh start with the Bar and Grill, after Prohibition ended, and Tiemann's gang—well, I know they'd been in bootlegging, because Tiemann himself tried once to make Dad turn the place into a speakeasy.

"When the bottom dropped out of bootlegging they started the protection racket, taking in places like ours that didn't have a lot of money and influence to use in fighting back. Dad fought. He never paid Tiemann a cent. Tiemann warned Dad he'd get him. Dad just laughed and told him where he could go. And Tiemann didn't do anything right away; didn't smash up our place the way he did some others. He worked slow; passed around nasty stories about us. Dad said they were nothing but a pack of yellow rats; said he could afford to sit tight and wait till the city got around to fumigating. . . .

"Then after a while Tiemann went to work on Dad, through me. Began by passing around stories about me, stories that came home to Dad and made him wild. And then Tiemann began really wanting me. Oh, he took his time and

made a big play for me. Gave me a line about wanting to quit the rackets and reform. I wouldn't have any of that, so he started to use threats. Things that were going to happen to Dad if I wouldn't be 'reasonable.' You can imagine."

"I can imagine," said Paradine mildly.

"Pete and I kept our marriage sort of secret, except from Dad. Pete sort of wanted it that way, until he'd earned enough to give me a home. Somehow or other Tiemann learned about it. He began telling me things that would happen to Pete. Pete didn't and still doesn't know that Tiemann was after me. I didn't dare tell him. I kept Tiemann off. But I couldn't have kept it up much longer; he wouldn't have stood it. He was the kind to go crazy for anything he didn't have. I—oh, I'm sick. I'm tired. I can't think."

"Take it easy. So you did kill Tiemann?"

"No!" Molly cried. "I went there last Tuesday night, sure. I went there with my mind made up to either give in to him or kill him. I thought I could kill him . . . He was sure he had me. He wasn't in any hurry then. He lounged around and tried to get me drunk. Sat there staring at me, saying how nice it was I'd decided to be reasonable—reasonable. That was his big word. Staring at me and scratching his cheek, like the way he had. I found I couldn't do either. I couldn't give in and couldn't kill him. I started to go; he grabbed me and I fought. That's how he got my hand-bag. He wasn't strong. I shoved him over, and his head hit the edge of a table and he didn't move and I thought maybe I'd killed him after all. I didn't care, then, but I was afraid. I didn't shoot him. . . .

"I went home. They came for me in the morning. The police. Pete was out. Dad didn't understand. I tried to tell him it was all some mistake. He wanted to fight 'em. They grabbed his arms. . . ."

Paradine waited a while before he urged her gently: "And when the gang

shot up the police car and kidnaped you?"

"I don't understand all of that. One of the kidnapers struck me on the head after they got me in their car. I didn't come out of it for a long while. When I did I was tied up in some wretched room, and Salter came in."

"Salter? One of Tiemann's friends?"

"A partner. He must be boss now, from the way he spoke. He thought I'd killed Tiemann. He said he'd taken me from the cops because he didn't want me to beat the rap the way I would, he said, if it got to a jury. But that wasn't his real reason. He thought I had something, a confession, that Tiemann had made him write. Salter was furious. I pieced it out from things he said. It seems Salter killed a man—it was that Banks' hold-up and murder, about a year ago. A jeweler was held up and shot. Salter did that; Tiemann made him write a confession and held it over him. Salter thought I had this confession."

"In other words," said Paradine with a new queer light in his eyes, "this Salter used to go by the name of Gus Snyder?"

"Yes."

"They dragged him in for the Steve Banks' murder, but there wasn't evidence enough and the grand jury had to chuck it without an indictment. A confession would turn the trick nicely, with what the cops already have."

"I suppose." Molly's head drooped; her words were coming with difficulty; she was ready to drop. "Anyhow, Salter thought I had this confession; thought I'd got it out of Tiemann's safe, and he wanted to know where it was. I couldn't tell him, and he said he'd burn it out of me. After that, he said, he'd see I didn't beat the rap—he'd deal it out to me himself. He meant it. He's cold; he's horrible. I was never afraid of Tiemann the way I was afraid of him. A small man, with a hooked nose."

"I know," said Paradine. "He reads newspapers. When I saw him this eve-

ning I was still fondly thinking of him as Gus Snyder."

"He left me alone after a while; another man set me free. I don't know who it was; his face was covered. I did see rings on his fingers. Another small man."

"Ferenczi," said Paradine laconically.

"And he's dead? He said they'd kill him if they knew he'd set me free, but he couldn't stand it to see Salter give me the works. He wasn't one of Salter's men. He came in when the room was dark and untied me and took me out the back way through an alley. And he's dead. . . ."

"Yeah; he's dead. Died apparently trying to tell Pete where you were. I wonder how he knew where to find you."

"I don't know," Molly groaned. "Well, I went down alone to the Bar and Grill. Found Dad alone. Pete was away. When Dad saw me, he—he always loved me so much—"

"So the two of you went to that empty house and hid out."

"He wasn't hiding!" Molly said. "He—well, he left a note telling Pete to carry on while he was away for a few days. Pete still thinks the police have me, you see, since they kept the snatch out of the papers. Dad said that the less Pete knew, the less he'd be in danger from the mob. . . . We were in that house two days and nights. Dad went away twice; he'd tried to make me tell where that hide-out of Salter's was, and I wouldn't because I knew what he'd do, but he said he'd find out anyway. Then, somehow, they found out where we were. They found Dad, when I'd gone out. Oh, why didn't they kill me. I was what they wanted."

"And you were there two or three hours before you found him, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Ever thought, Molly, that Pete Holden might have learned more than you think? That maybe he did kill Tiemann for good and sufficient reasons?"

"Pete's not a murderer."

"Oh, anybody can kill. . . . Oh, by the way, where is that place of Salter's?"

Molly gave a West Side waterfront address; then pressed both hands to her mouth and gasped through her fingers: "Before God, give me your word you won't go there. I didn't mean to say it. You tricked me!"

"Why, shucks!" Paradine laughed. "Best thing would be to tip off the cops that they'd find something up there. I'm a lazy man, myself. But meantime I can nose around and get a line on things—on who did kill Tiemann and so on."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Do?" said Paradine. "Play the piano while you take your drink. Then I'm going out. You'll drink it if you trust me, Molly."

Paradine played the Chopin "*Berceuse*," with the corner of his eye he saw her fingers curl around the glass; presently she drained it. . . . Paradine knew his Chopin, as he knew his other friends. Once he heard Molly make a drowsy noise in her throat. When the Cradle Song was ended, he saw that she was asleep, prone on the divan with one hand curled under her chin.

Paradine watched her a while. "I wonder if she did kill that punk. . . ."

He bent over and touched his lips lightly to the fragrant warmth of her red hair; then he straightened angrily as someone shoved a finger into the doorbell of the apartment and kept it there.

HE SWEPT Molly off the divan and carried her to the bedroom. She made feeble protesting sounds out of sleep as Paradine took off her shoes, put her in the bed and pulled the covers up as far as her nose; but then she settled with a long sigh into deeper slumber. He hurried back to the living-room, shutting the bedroom door. The bell

still shrilled. He thrust Molly's coat and hat into the closet; then he opened the front door and snarled:

"What the flaming hell is your idea? Take your claws off that damned bell. Oh, it's you, Shapiro. Hello, Leeds. Well, come in. My sister's just got back from the hospital and she's trying to sleep. If you make any noise I'll kill you both and dump you down the incinerator with the other garbage."

The heavy-jawed police captain flushed, hesitating on the doorsill. Lieutenant Leeds, suave and tall with steady black eyes, came in ahead of the Captain, glancing around the living-room, taking in everything and saying nothing. Captain Shapiro mumbled:

"Damn sorry, Paradine. Didn't know. Didn't even know you had a sister, old man. Look, this is sort of official, Paradine." Shapiro closed the door and his expression slowly changed.

Paradine's mask still held the show of anger. Shapiro was intensely uncomfortable, running a finger around the inside of his collar, putting his blunt head on one side, gray eyes round and troubled. "We had a look at your car, front of the house," said Captain Shapiro.

Paradine spoke with acid sweetness: "Did I forget parking lights, officer?"

"Don't be like that." Shapira rubbed his neck. "You've got a bullet hole in the rear fender. Another one in the place where your rear vision mirror used to be."

There was anger in Paradine's eyes. "Must have got there since I left it. It was all right then, an hour or so ago."

"You just brought your sister from the hospital, in your car?"

"Yes."

Captain Shapiro sat down heavily on the divan. He sniffed, and his jaw hardened.

"I kind of wish," said Captain Shapiro, "you wouldn't take that tone. . . . Remember I was telling you the other

night, about how that Hanifin woman got away from us?"

"How she was taken away? Yes, I remember. What about it?"

"There was a shooting tonight, down at Ed Hanifin's Bar and Grill. Man named Al Ferenczi got shot pretty dead. One of the Tiemann men, he was. You were there. We got a tip-off, where the Hanifin woman was hiding out with her dad. We knew they were together somewhere. Tip went out over short-wave of course, couple boys from a radio car got there and found Ed Hanifin shot to death. Leeds and I went over.

"Couple blocks from the place, I had a glimpse of you in your car, with some girl. Must've been your sister. Looked like Molly Hanifin, but I figured then, seeing it was you it couldn't be her. We saw a car right behind with a bunch of tough babies in it, but again, I figured, seeing it was you, they couldn't be anything to you, see? The Hanifin woman had skipped out along the roofs just before the men from the radio car broke in. There was some man with her. Trail in the snow a mile wide. They broke through the skylight of a guy's bedroom. We talked with this guy. He thinks he'd know the man again.

"There was a mean smash-up over on Ninth, this evening. Car tried to climb the El. It was full of rats. Tiemann rats. Four of 'em. Three are dead, and the one in the hospital—well, doctor says he ain't likely to talk now or later. They had a Tommy gun in the car.

"The cop on the beat saw a big guy get out of the roadster and start toward the smash and then pop back and take a run-out. . . . Funny smell around here. Kind of nice perfume. Unusual. '*Fillette Mechante*', that's the fancy French name of it. I know, because Molly Hanifin told me. Only other time I ever smelt it was when I arrested her. I'm playing fair with you, Paradine, because I always liked you, even if you are nutty as all hell. We want Molly

Hanifin. We want her bad. We want her for murder. Right away. She killed Dutch Tiemann. She may have killed her father."

The Captain stood up, walked a few paces up and down the room. He lifted the can of sardines from the mantel and eyed it wearily.

"Damn you," said Paradine, "that's my supper. You can't have it. I don't know anything about Molly Hanifin."

"Then why does this room smell of her perfume?"

"My sister uses it. It's not so uncommon as you think."

Captain Shapiro drew in deep breath. Leeds had not moved. Shapiro stood in front of Paradine, staring up, head on one side.

"I hate it," he said, "but we've got to search this place."

Paradine stepped quickly in front of the bedroom door and his face twisted and went livid.

"You can't do that. I tell you, my sister's ill. She's got to sleep. It's T.B. She had to have a lung collapsed. I'm taking her south next week, otherwise I'd've had her stay at the hospital. If she's got to be waked up by a pair of damned flatfeet banging around the room—you can't do that. You haven't a warrant."

"I have a warrant," said the Captain. "Hoped I wouldn't have to use it. I hate this worse than you do. I'll do my best not to wake her, Paradine."

Paradine said at last: "All right, Shapiro. You can start with the bathroom and dining-room and kitchenette, out that way. I'll see if my sister's still asleep."

Shapiro nodded to Leeds, who went with him to the rear of the apartment. Paradine entered the bedroom, locking the door.

Molly was motionless in deep slumber. Light from a window across the court showed the pale outline of her face, childishly delicate in relaxation.

Paradine remembered a box of sketch-

ing materials which he had bought years before and then never used. He unearthed it in his closet and found in it a few sticks of drawing charcoal.

A few strokes of the charcoal lengthened the line of her eyebrow visible above the bed covers; a mark at the side of her nose made it seem sharper in that vague light, aging her face. Paradine viewed his work with a wan grin; grabbed a box of after-shaving talcum powder and sprinkled it thickly over the profusion of her hair. It would pass for gray hair, if Shapiro didn't turn on the light. Paradine unscrewed the bulb of the bedside lamp and tucked it away in a drawer. Molly's breathing continued regular and quiet.

They were coming back from the rear of the apartment. Paradine unlocked the door.

"All right. She's still asleep," he whispered. "It's a miracle, after the happy time you had with the doorball. You can use your flash; if you turn it on her and wake her I'll kill you. And be quiet."

Shapiro briefly turned his pocket flash into the closet, then stood in the middle of the dark room, glancing uneasily toward the bed.

"If you must," said Paradine, and gripped Shapiro's arm, turning off the flashlight but not trying to take it from the Captain's hand. Paradine hoped sickly that the pounding of blood in his throat was hidden as he led Shapiro to the bed and whispered: "Does the Hanifin woman have gray hair?"

Shapiro stared once, sharply, then blinked his eyes and tiptoed out. With the door closed, he mopped his forehead and groaned:

"I hope you don't hate me for this, Paradine. I hope your sister gets better."

Leeds said, "About the bullet holes in your car—"

"Shut up," said Captain Shapiro.



AT ONE o'clock Paradine tiptoed into the bedroom and took the charcoal marks off Molly with light touches of a damp cloth. He set the can of sardines down softly on the pillow.

From the lower drawer of the dresser he took out a shoulder holster and a Colt .38. He went to the front window and smiled down at the slope-shouldered figure across the street. Shapiro had left a man on watch.

Paradine shrugged and left the house. He walked two blocks to the subway, without haste and without looking behind him. In the station he caught sight of the slope-shouldered man. He boarded Paradine's downtown train, reading a newspaper with tremendous concentration.

Paradine sent him a vague, friendly smile, and the newspaper immediately covered his whole face. Paradine got off and walked toward the single yellow glow that was Hanifin's Bar and Grill.

Pete Holden was alone. He watched Paradine come in with hostile eyes, and said:

"That was nice, the way you ran out when trouble started. I had to tell the police you'd been here and run out as if you were chasing somebody."

"As if I was chasing somebody," said Paradine. "Funny. I had an idea I was chasing somebody. . . . I've talked with the cops, of course. Look here, Pete, I've been hearing things about you."

"What?"

"Oh," said Paradine, "I heard you'd been having trouble with rats. It does beat hell, the way they get into everything. I'm the exterminator."

Pete said. "Talk sense!"

Paradine watched his eyes. They were agate hard, made so by his trouble and anxiety, perhaps. "You don't feel a bit good, do you? Well, it isn't strange,

with Ed Hanifin dead and the cops on a hunt for your wife."

Pete's hands turned into fists. "What's that you said? Ed Hanifin—"

"He's dead. Someone shot him three times through the heart. It was fairly straight shooting, for a punk. I have a funny feeling that whoever did it ought not to live. Yes, the cops would like to know where your wife is. . . . Incidentally, I noticed that Salter didn't shoot Ferenczi himself. But I think he had it done, didn't he?"

"Salter?" said Pete Holden slowly. "Who is Salter?"

"A small fellow with a parrot beak who reads newspapers." Paradine's voice was soft; deep purring cello notes from his chest. "I noticed a couple of cops across the street when I came in just now. There was another, tailing me. The three of 'em are having a conference, I suppose. Queer people, cops; sometimes I like 'em, sometimes I don't. Did you kill Dutch Tiemann?"

"You must be crazy," said Pete Holden. "I ought to throw you out. Who the hell told you I was married?"

Paradine shrugged. "You might get away with it on the unwritten law basis or something. Tiemann was a louse and it was a shame the way he went hunting after your wife. . . . I don't really know a lot, Pete: that's the devil of it." Paradine's hand rested against his vest. "If I knew more, I could tell for sure whether you're a good egg or a damned swine. Tiemann's ailment was that he was too loose around the mouth. You're too tight. . . ."

"I wonder why Ferenczi thought it was so important to give you that address; so important that he got himself shot for it. And you didn't seem a bit interested, I remember. Ah, draw me a beer, Pete. I don't feel so damned good myself."

Holden reached for a glass, his hands shaking. He said:

"If I thought for a minute that you were straight about this. . . . I think

you're heeling around for the cops. You're trying to find out from me where Molly is, so the cops can get her. She didn't kill Tiemann. If I didn't think that was your game, maybe I'd loosen up and tell you things."

"You don't know where Molly is," said Paradine. "I don't see how you knew she wasn't still in the jail-house; the snatch was kept out of the papers. . . . This glass is dirty. Ed Hanifin never stood for anything like that when he was alive. Get me a clean one."

Pete Holden picked up the glass Paradine had shoved toward him. He held it in his shaking hand, and foam spilled, and the hand tightened. Paradine murmured:

"You want to throw that in my face. Don't do it, Pete."

Pete said stiff-mouthed: "I'm sorry. The clean ones must be out back."

"Uh-huh. The only way I can figure it out, Pete, is this: Now that Tiemann's dead, his mob has split in two. Salter is the natural heir apparent, except for one thing: he hasn't got the confession that Tiemann made him write, the confession to the murder of Steve Banks. You remember Tiemann made Salter write out and sign a—"

"I remember!" Holden laughed, gripping the edge of the bar. "What the devil are you trying to do?"

Paradine ignored that. "Salter hasn't got that confession. Tiemann's safe was rifled when he was killed. It's a good bet that the one who killed Tiemann has that confession. And the one who has that confession can send Salter straight to the chair any old time. Salter knows that. . . . Get me a clean glass."

Pete walked stiffly to the kitchen at the back. From the kitchen Paradine heard the clink of glassware, but it was an unreasonably long moment before Pete returned with a glass, its bottom resting in his curled palm. He held it under the tap, eyes downcast; sliced off the foam from the top and set it.

"Thanks," Paradine said. "Three of the Tiemann crowd died tonight in an automobile smash. Three dead, and one in the hospital not much good to anybody. Tiemann men—that means Salter men, I think. They were Salter men, so I guess you probably hadn't heard."

"Just what do you mean?"

Paradine gazed into his untouched beer. "Tiemann himself told me not very long ago that you, Pete, were trying to muscle in on him. You joined up with Ed Hanifin two years ago, and it was two years ago that the Tiemann mob went to work on Ed. Now you explain."

"It's a damned lie," Pete spat.

"O. K.," said Paradine, and smiled suddenly. "It's a damned lie, son. I wanted to hear that. . . . Dig me up a ham sandwich, will you, Pete?"

Pete turned away, shoulders relaxed. He disappeared in the kitchen again. Paradine, watching him go, had a queer sort of despair and uncertainty in his face. He bent swiftly, his hand visible through the plate-glass window, and poured out the beer into the cuspidor near his feet, shielding the glass from his own fingers with a paper napkin. He thrust the glass, still covered by the napkin, in his overcoat pocket; reached down the counter for another empty, unwashed glass and clicked it down in front of him with a smack of his lips as Holden returned from the kitchen with the sandwich.

"Never mind that sandwich after all," said Paradine. "Look, Pete, sorry I had to put you through it, after all the rat trouble you've been having around here, but I had to find out something. I wasn't sure about you. Maybe I'm not quite sure, even yet; but I'm going to take a chance." Paradine reached across the bar and dropped his hand on Holden's shoulder; the shoulder winced slightly, and stiffened, but Paradine kept his hand there.

"Look here, Pete, Salter's got your

wife. Up at his hide-out. I'm going there. I'm going to blast hell out of that pack of rats. I think you're going to help. Instead of heeling around for the cops, Pete, I'm in bad with them. So bad it's a wonder I'm not locked up. It looks to me as if you'd kind of stood around and let the Hanifins fight alone. But maybe I'm wrong. If you've got what it takes, you'll come along and help me get Molly. Salter hasn't got that confession, but he's got your wife. He thinks she has the confession, you see. He wants it. His methods aren't very nice, I'm told."

Pete Holden had gone chalk-white. "If I could believe you—"

Paradine jammed his hand down into his overcoat pocket. "Of course, if you want to sit and count your fingers while another man pulls your wife out of hell—"

"I'm coming with you," Pete Holden said. He ripped off his apron and ran to the back, flinging on his coat, turning off the restaurant lights. When he came front to lock the door, Paradine was looking across the street. He said:

"Right, son. We go out the back way."

They slipped through the service alley at the rear of the Bar and Grill; nevertheless, in the subway Paradine saw the slope-shouldered man on the platform, and a square bulk in blue uniform lounged near him. Paradine slung his arm back of Pete's shoulders affectionately and said:

"I'm tired of cops. Next station, follow my lead. Maybe it'll work."

The train snarled into Fourteenth Street. Paradine bolted from his seat and plunged through the door, Holden behind him. The police shadows stepped off the train without haste. Just before the door slid shut, Paradine and Holden were back inside the car; it ground past the slope-shouldered man, and through the glass Paradine gave the officers a smile of dazzling sweetness.



ALTER'S house near the water-front was a blind thing, hiding secrets behind tightly shuttered windows that had no light behind them. It was next door to an all-night coffee shop, and the counterman moved, as Paradine and Holden went by, and walked unhurriedly toward the back of his shop. Paradine saw that, and thought that Holden saw it too. But Holden turned directly into an alley without a word. Paradine murmured: "You seem to know the way."

"I've been here before. So what? That guy in the shop saw us. The only way into the house except by the front door is through that shop."

"Got a gun?"

"Yes. Have you?"

"Yes; I have a gun. Let's go."

Holden walked down into the alley, Paradine a pace or two behind. He sensed rather than saw that Holden had stopped again. Then Holden gasped, staggered backward into Paradine, righted himself and snarled. Paradine heard a swish in the air and flung up his arm, catching a savage blow on it, apparently from a blackjack. Paradine grabbed the arm that held the thing, and threw his weight backward, tugging.

The dimly visible man with the sapper lost his balance; his feet scrambled loosely on the gravel of the alley, and his left side crashed into the wall of the building. Paradine sent his right fist where he expected to find the point of a jaw, and found it. There was the thick sound of a body falling helplessly. Paradine struck a match and knelt for a second. The man was out cold. He was the coffee shop attendant.

Further down the alley, Holden was struggling with someone. A tiny glow came from the rear exit of the coffee shop, and Paradine saw the two straining figures stumble through that light. Holden had a man by the throat and

was stepping backward, dragging him; Holden's voice was saying, "You guessed wrong, fella."

The man Holden held dropped with a small choking sound and lay still. Holden came toward the light brushing his hands together; saw Paradine and said: "Heels!"

The alley opened into the kitchen of the coffee shop, and this kitchen was empty. One dirty wall was a half-inch out of true, showing itself to be a door slightly ajar; beyond it there was darkness. Holden stood at one side of it, reached out and shoved it gently with his foot.

Paradine was just behind Holden, and Paradine's hand was on his holster. They cat-footed through the secret door.

From some uncertain direction there was the sound of a low monotone. The light from the kitchen touched the steps of a staircase. The treads did not creak. A door, with a dim light behind it, was at the head of the stairs.

Holden put his ear at the crack. He shaped words! "If she isn't here, Paradine—"

"If she isn't here it's my fault," said Paradine, and Holden might make what he could of that.

Behind that door the monotone said:

"You think we're washed up. Maybe. If you hadn't sent the boys out after that fat ape because you thought the girl with him looked like the Hanifin broad, we'd be sitting pretty. Mueller in the hospital is liable to squeal. You can thank yourself for that, Marsh. And if anything happens, you're the goat. I can see to that. If the cops get you, you'll be the head of the mob—that's what they'll hear, and you'll get the whole works. The Ferenczi killing will come right home to you where it belongs, and up you go to the hot squat. But my nose is clean."

A dry, nasal voice, the same monotone that had said, earlier that night, "Watch it, Ferenczi!" when Ferenczi was already past watching anything,

said, "But, Salter, it was your orders. You wanted Ferenczi gunned out. Suppose I *was* trigger man, it was your orders."

"I'll enjoy watching you try to tell that to the cops. No, Marsh, if the cops come down on us, you're for it. I'm telling you so that you won't get wrong ideas. I saw you shoot Ferenczi, and I can get witnesses to prove I was there reading a newspaper when it happened. Salter laughed. "You can't say I wanted Ferenczi gunned out. Seemed like he wanted himself gunned out. He was asking for it. All the other boys were loyal. Hey, Belling? That right? All loyal as hell, weren't you?"

A third voice answered in a thin toady's whine. Salter went on:

"Uh-huh. Poor Ferenczi was the only one that was damn fool enough to throw in with—"

Pete Holden kicked the door open; stepped through with a gun out in his right hand and said:

"Reach, boys! Up! All the way up!"

Paradine eased his bulk through the doorway and kicked the door shut behind him; his Colt drooped from his hand, not pointing anywhere in particular; he remarked:

"Better satisfy him, gentlemen. Peter's riding high tonight."

Salter got up slowly, both thin hands in sight. The man's even, reptilian calm chilled Paradine. The other two in the room stayed in their chairs, frozen. A wide-shouldered, slab-faced man with drooping cheeks; that was Beef Marsh. Marsh was right, in his blind way; you couldn't say he'd killed Ferenczi. He'd only pulled the trigger. The other man cringed, his narrow little face gone gray. Belling, Salter had called him; but his name didn't matter. The city's mean streets spawned his like by the hundreds.

Salter said almost gently: "Well, young man?"

"Where is she?" Holden said.

Salter glanced quickly at Beef Marsh,

and then allowed a grin to curl up his lips. He said: "Why, he's looking for a woman. Take a walk, buddy. Somebody gave you the wrong address."

"You're asking for it," Holden said, and his voice cracked. "I can shoot you first and find her afterward. Where is she?"

Salter gave Marsh another quick look. Paradine saw what it meant. The only light burning in the room was a bridge lamp near the chair where Salter had been sitting. A section of the cord was exposed, and that section was within reach of Marsh's long leg. Paradine pointed his gun at Marsh's slightly moving foot and said:

"Don't believe I would, Beef."

"Where is she?" Pete Holden said.

Salter shrugged. "She's not here." For the first time Salter's moving slanted eyes acknowledged Paradine's existence. "I can tell you where she is, maybe, in return for—let's say, services rendered."

Paradine's grip on his gun tightened. Salter was walking straight toward Holden's gun, hands above his shoulders, and there was still a grin curling his lip. A foot or so from the point of the gun he stopped, and his right hand came down and out in slow motion, toward Holden, the fingers cupped.

"Molly's in a tough spot," Salter said, "so I hear. You can get her out of it all right, I guess. She's still all in one piece, so far as I know. You can get her out, in return for—well, let's quit stalling, Pete. Hand it over. . . . The gun don't mean a thing. You're still crazy about that broad, so I've got you where I want you. Hand it over. You know what I mean."

Angry blood mottled Holden's face. "Where is she?"

"Why, he's like one of these trained birds. Can't say only just one thing. You're funny, Pete. You don't know how funny you are."

It had looked like a grandstand play, when Salter walked up to the gun, grinning at it. It was more than that. Para-

dine realized too late that Salter had put himself in front of Marsh. The slab-faced man stabbed out his foot, yanking the cord free from the wall-socket and throwing the room into blackness.

Death shouted through orange flame.



DROPPING flat, Paradine rolled his body till it wedged against the door. He braced up on his left elbow, his gun gripped in his right but not shooting in the darkness.

There was enough shooting without Paradine's help.

Gunfire flared from the corner of the room where Belling had been cowering. That shot was answered from somewhere near Paradine; Holden's gun, perhaps. Belling's scream was thin and high. Light stumbling footsteps reached the door, and a weight fell across Paradine's legs. There was choking and gasping, audible under the noise that another gun was making now.

Paradine slipped his gun to his left, reached down and gripped the thing lying across his legs and flung it away. It was Belling, limp, unresisting. Paradine's hand was stickily wet.

Holden was on the other side of the room now. Paradine heard him shout thickly, over and over: "You're asking for it! You're asking for it!"

Paradine reached up, feeling for the doorkey; found it, turned it, and dropped it in his pocket. He got slowly to his feet; moved crouching across the room, a step at a time, toward the wall-socket.

There was no more shooting now. Holden said from an uncertain direction in a drawn, wavering voice:

"You asked for it. . . ."

There wasn't any answer.

Paradine put down his left hand, feeling about on the floor. Someone was breathing hard, sobbing. The room stunk; gun-smoke and the sweetish reek of fresh blood. Paradine's fingers found

the light cord, the plug and then the socket.

The lamp had been knocked over, but a metal shade had saved its bulb. Light washed up from the floor, leaving two dead open-eyed faces in shadow, and a third face that was waiting for death.

Beef Marsh had not gone far from his chair. He lay beside it, his long body curled in a question mark, and the dot of the question mark was a red smear, showing the place where Belling had evidently risen once, after Paradine flung him away and before he tumbled in a heap across Salter's legs to finish dying.

Salter sat braced against the wall, both hands pressed white on the floor. He was bleeding, but his eyes were still alive, fixed on Holden, who stood in the middle of the room swaying, breathing painfully, his gun drooping. Salter's wound was somewhere in the middle of his chest, and there were flecks of foamy blood on his lips; he spoke, like a phonograph running down:

"You won't get anywhere with it, Pete. You're just funny. It's a wonder Ferenczi didn't know how damn funny you are. Tiemann knew. Tiemann knew even when. . . ."

Pete Holden was walking toward the dying man. Paradine moved toward him quickly. Not quickly enough. The gun in Holden's hand roared, kicking up.

Salter jerked convulsively, quivered and fell over flat.

Paradine grabbed Holden from behind, seizing both arms and holding them out at the side. Holden stiffened and strained away, but could not break the grip. Paradine's hand wormed down Holden's right arm till it reached the wrist, then squeezed with all the sudden power of trained muscles, paralyzing Holden's clasp on the gun, which clattered on the floor. Paradine kicked it away, but still kept his grip on Holden's arms and said:

"It's all over. Understand that?"

Holden said, "Molly—"

"You haven't the right to think much about Molly," Paradine said, "except for one thing. You can make it a little easier for her, if you want to. You can have an out. I'll give you that."

Pete suddenly wrenched at the restraining hands. It was no good; the pale corded hands were expecting it. Holden threw himself this way and that, blindly, an animal in a trap. Paradine drew the man's hands together so that his own right could hold both wrists. Paradine's left hand moved under Holden's coat, found the inner pocket empty and slid down.

Under Holden's vest there was the faint rustle of paper. Paradine ripped open vest and shirt, caught the edge of the paper clasped to Holden's under-shirt and drew it out. A single sheet, covered with fine, tight handwriting and signed with Salter's name.

Paradine freed Holden's wrists and sent him staggering toward the armchair across the smeared question mark that had been Beef Marsh. Before Holden could push himself up out of the chair, Paradine's gun covered his heart. Paradine said:

"No more shooting. I said it was all over. This paper proves you killed Tiemann. I knew that, but I had to prove it to myself."

The bleak light from the floor poured along the high-lights of Holden's defeated face. He sank back in the chair, staring vacantly.

"You got this confession of Salter's when you killed Tiemann. Man, you were a fool to think you could make Salter talk turkey the way Tiemann could. It took an old hand like Tiemann to manage a cold fish like Salter. Salter was right. Ferenczi was another damn fool for throwing in with you. But I think I know why he did."

Holden said nothing. Paradine went on:

"Ferenczi threw in with you because he loved your wife. Not the way Tiemann did. Really loved her, I guess.

He saved her life and it cost him his. He got her away from this place when Salter had her here and was planning to pull her apart. Ferenczi joined with you for Molly's sake only, and not because he thought there was any chance you could fill Tiemann's shoes the way you planned to."

Paradine waited. Holden had gone limp, and shut his eyes. Holden said nothing.

"And when Ferenczi wrote out that address you wiped it away. Because you already knew it. You'd been there, about three hours before. I think Ed Hanifin learned that you were in the racket up to your neck. He went for you with both hands; and you shot him to death."

Holden let out a shaken breath.

"Maybe," said Paradine, "when you went to Tiemann's place that night it was an unwritten law set-up, at first. You learned—maybe from Ferenczi—what Tiemann was up to with your wife. So you went there to kill. I think you found him unconscious. Molly'd left the door open when she ran out. You walked in a little later and found him out cold, but alive, and killed him like that." Paradine stepped closer; murmured: "But you must have known that was Molly's hand-bag. Sort of spoils the unwritten law business, doesn't it?"

Holden's eyes flew wide open then. Blood was throbbing in his temples; he twisted his hands and cried out:

"I didn't know it was her bag! I hardly saw it. I shot him, yes. I got the things out of his safe, money, and that confession. But I didn't know it was her bag."

"It's possible," said Paradine. "I believe you. You did care about Molly, in your way. . . . How long did you work for Tiemann before he ordered you to work in with Hanifin?"

Holden looked at the question mark on the floor; moved his foot a little further from it; said:

"Three years. Years of doing what

he told me to. . . . But I wanted to go straight after—after we were married."

"Wanted to." Paradine's voice was chilled with contempt. "If a man wants to, he does. He may have to fight for it, and go hungry, but if he wants to be straight, he is straight. There's a rotten spot in you, and it spread, that's all."

"Save the lecture," said Holden. "I know when I'm through."

Paradine's face softened. "There's a decent out for you if you want it."

"I want it," Holden said. "You'll have to give me that. I know what you mean."

"Yes; you know what I mean. Man, you were wild, to think you could be another Tiemann. Even if you'd won out at the start and made Salter come to heel a while, being boss would have finished you. I wasn't certain about that part of it. I wasn't sure that's what it was—your hankering to be the big shot. I brought you here in order to prove it. And Salter proved it nicely, to my satisfaction. Molly isn't here, Pete. Salter hasn't had her here since Ferenczi got her out. She's with me."

"With you!" Holden started to rise, but Paradine waved the gun and Holden dropped back.

"She's all right," said Paradine. "She will be all right; she's got courage. She could even stand it to live through the days of your trial. Watching the State put you to death would be—well, she's still in love with you. She might believe you weren't guilty. She might have that thought to live with, after you'd been tried on the front page and then burnt." Paradine picked up Holden's gun in his left hand, by the barrel. "You killed Ed Hanifin, Pete? You're admitting that?"

"Yes." A sigh curiously like relief followed the simple word.

"With this gun?" said Paradine.

"Yes."

"Used this one on Tiemann too?"

"Yes."

"There's a glass in my pocket. Came from the Bar and Grill. Traces of beer in it. Traces of poison in the beer, aren't there? That's what the police chemist will find, isn't it, Pete?"

Pete Holden set his teeth; groaned through them: "Yes. Rat poison."

"Sure you want the out, Pete? It's up to you."

"I want it."

Paradine glanced at the chambers of Holden's gun; said: "There's another death in it," and tossed it across the question mark.

Holden caught it by the grip. His livid face squeezed up like a crying baby's. He said:

"There isn't a damned bit of evidence."

Holden's gun blazed—outward.

Paradine felt a blow under his ribs; felt his right forefinger tighten, but scarcely heard the explosion that followed. The blow had spun him half-way around, and there were wide scarlet wheels spinning away from his eyes toward black distance. His mind cleared before his eyes did, laboriously but sanely tracing the course of that bullet. It had struck near the hip-bone on the left, and ranged upward, until a rib stopped it at the back. The spinning wheels changed to zigzag lines, showing the course of that bullet, and then they disappeared, and Paradine saw the room again, and saw Pete Holden dead, on the other side of the question mark, with a neat bullet hole between his eyes. Paradine said carefully out loud:

"I am not going to fall down. Plenty of evidence, Pete. Especially now." Paradine pressed his left hand to his side; it seemed to ease the pain that was sending white fire up and down his back; he holstered his gun; said, "Poor devil. Poor devil." He walked to the door, turned the key, said again: "I am not going to fall down."



LASTS of cold air outside the house made Paradine more light-headed. The pain was like something walking beside him, clear of his body. The wound was not bleeding much; Paradine kept his left hand pressed on it, outside his overcoat; walked two blocks before he found a taxi and climbed in and gave the address of his apartment. He tried to ease himself down on the seat, but the car's jerking start threw him backward and he said, almost shouting:

"I can do it if little Ferenczi could!"

"Huh?" said the driver, braking and turning half-around. Paradine leaned forward; gabbled:

"Drive fast. I'm drunk. What I want is speed. The reason is that I am rather—"

"Drunk," said the driver, and threw in the clutch. Outside Paradine's apartment the cabbie gave the big man his arm, helping him to the lobby, remarking: "Sure. I know how it is, buddy."

Paradine dug up a five-dollar bill; said:

"Hope you have nine children, and every one of them a fine, upstanding man like—"

"Go to bed," said the driver. "Thanks."

Paradine reached the third floor in the self-service elevator. But outside the door of his apartment his knees buckled and gave way. He reached up with his key and struggled with the lock a while; said:

"Ferenczi—"

The door opened. Paradine scrambled inside on hands and knees, shoved it shut behind him. The telephone was in the foyer. Paradine rested both arms on the telephone table, trying to rise. The apartment was dark and silent. But, of course, Molly must be still asleep. Paradine got a grip on the telephone and pulled it down.

Now the pain was a thing that hung somewhere between him and the ceiling, jeering at him because his fingers were furry and had trouble with the telephone dial. Paradine laughed; heard himself do it. After a time there was a tired, peevish voice on the phone. Paradine said:

"Still awake, Shapiro?"

"You!"

"Shapiro, listen." Paradine's voice was low, but steady enough. It told everything. Everything except the fact that Paradine expected to die. Paradine knew Shapiro was not the only one listening at the precinct station telephone; knew that even before he hung up there would be a squad car cutting across the city to the water-front to find out if he spoke the truth. Paradine wound up:

"Come here yourself, Shapiro. I've got evidence, with me."

"Coming," Shapiro said, hostile, weary and suspicious.

"Bring a surgeon with you."

"A surgeon? You're—"

Paradine hung up the receiver sharply; called:

"Molly? Molly?"

There was light; Molly's face somewhere above him; between him and the pain. Paradine wanted to tell her something important, but heard himself say only: "I'm sorry about that talcum powder." Then he fainted, and the lapse of consciousness made it seem that Molly's face melted into Captain Shapiro's...

Shapiro was real. He was there, kneeling beside Paradine on the floor of the foyer. Paradine reached complete clarity for a while, and saw the other faces—Molly's, Lieutenant Leeds', Dr. Meier's.

"Molly," Paradine said, "go away. I want to talk to this square-headed ape. Leeds, take her out back and give her some black coffee. She's had sleeping drops. . . . Listen, Shapiro, can you fix it so she won't know? So she can think he went out clean? Why not pile

it on Salter? Give the papers that. He could have been guilty."

"We'll do what we can for her," Shapiro said, "if what you've told is the truth."

Dr. Meier shoved an elbow in Shapiro's belly. Meier had been cutting the clothes away from the wound; Shapiro was in the way.

"I've got proof," said Paradine. "It might not stand up in court, with a shyster to talk the jury deaf, dumb and blind, but Pete Holden isn't going to court. In the drinking glass you'll find traces of poison, arsenic, I suppose. And the bullets. The one from Tiemann's body will match the ones from Ed Hanifin's, if you haven't already found that out. And the other bullet from Holden's gun. That'll match."

"The other bullet," asked Shapiro vaguely, "from Holden's gun?"

"How should I know just where it is?" Paradine snarled. "I brought it with me, and if your doctor can't find it, then he's—" He laughed. "Your medical man is trying to hurt me with a little—hypodermic—syringe. . . ."

He swam up out of long hours of morphine sleep, aware of diluted sunshine coming through blinds. The room was his own but there was an alien face under a white cap, and he asked it:

"Where's Molly?"

"She's having breakfast." The face smiled with professional kindness. "She didn't sleep, like you did."

"Breakfast!" Paradine grunted; there were slow waves of pain, and he wondered why he didn't mind them much. "Tell her I want to talk to her."

Molly had already come in. There was something white in her hand, and

her eyes were red-rimmed but quiet.

"Sit down," Paradine said. "What'd they tell you?"

Molly looked away. "Everything," said Molly. She sat down in a chair by the bed; looked him full in the face. "I overheard some of what you were telling the Captain. I asked him, and he told me everything. I'm all right, Mr. Paradine. I fought it out. If nobody says anything about it to me for a while. . . . I know Pete died trying to kill you. After a while I'll go away."

"Stop at that point," said Paradine, and sighed. "You've got what it takes. You won't ever be exactly alone in the world. You have yourself, and that's good company. You'll find others. Marry again, of course. Do that. It gets tiresome, living alone."

"No. Never."

"Of course you will," Paradine snorted. "What the hell's that you got hold of?"

Molly glanced at the sandwich in her hand. "I don't know what's in it."

"Dear heart," Paradine moaned, "It's stupid to live alone. I'd marry you myself, fat and past fifty though I am and in spite of your nasty habit of calling me Mr. Paradine—if only you had a sense of humor."

"Why, I—"

"No; you haven't. How did you get that damned can of sardines open without a key?"

Molly's weary face stared, sober, a little surprised. "With a can-opener."

"Oh," said Paradine. "With a can-opener. Just like that." He sighed, and turned his mild plump face away from her, and slept.



MOBSTER GUNS

A stunt flyer quits his movie rôle and Bill Lennox skirmishes with death to find out why



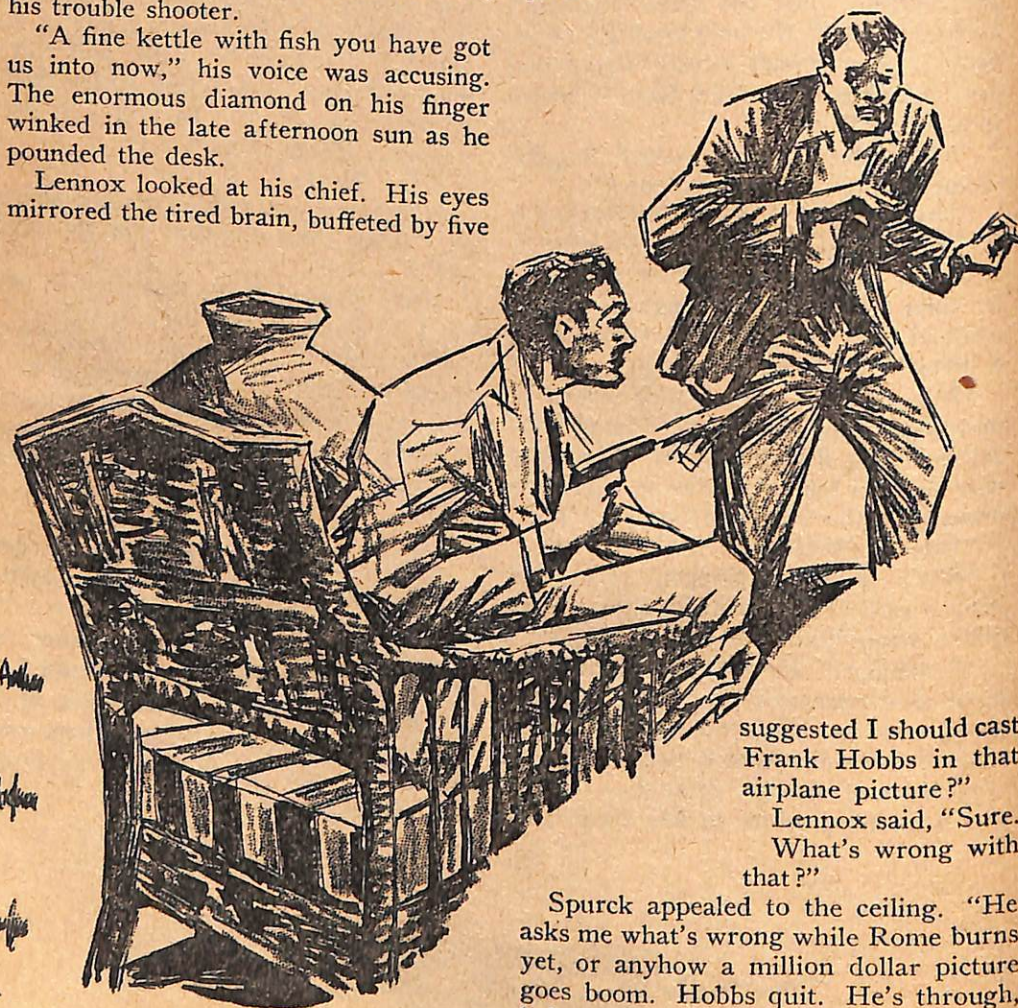
SOL SPURCK, vice-president in charge of production at General Consolidated's West Coast studio stared across his massive desk at Bill Lennox, his trouble shooter.

"A fine kettle with fish you have got us into now," his voice was accusing. The enormous diamond on his finger winked in the late afternoon sun as he pounded the desk.

Lennox looked at his chief. His eyes mirrored the tired brain, buffeted by five

years of Hollywood turmoil. "What have I done now?"

Spurck seemed to gather himself together as if in preparation for an explosion, but when he spoke his tone was deceptively mild. "Answer me one thing, please. Was it or was it not you which



suggested I should cast Frank Hobbs in that airplane picture?"

Lennox said, "Sure.

What's wrong with that?"

Spurck appealed to the ceiling. "He asks me what's wrong while Rome burns yet, or anyhow a million dollar picture goes boom. Hobbs quit. He's through, he's running out. The picture is half in

By W. T. BALLARD

the can and he says maybe he come back next month and finish it."

Lennox' eyes widened. "What's this?"

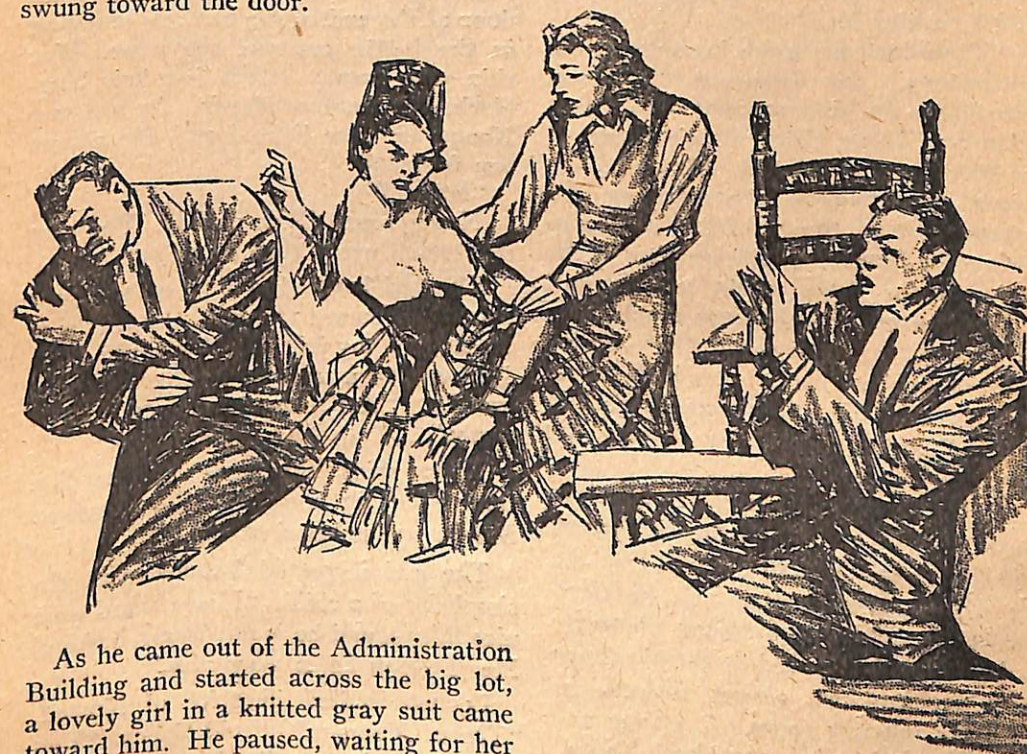
Spurck said, "Ain't I just been telling you? Hobbs is walking out, quitting us cold."

Lennox said, "I'll see about that," and swung toward the door.

up his part until he's playing the second lead. Now he's trying to run out on us."

The girl wrinkled her pretty brows. "Run out on you? That doesn't sound like Frank. I don't get it."

Lennox shook his head. "I don't get it either. I want to talk to him and he's



As he came out of the Administration Building and started across the big lot, a lovely girl in a knitted gray suit came toward him. He paused, waiting for her to come up.

Nancy Hobbs, feature writer for one of Hollywood's better fan magazines, smiled. "Hello, Bill. You look as if the Hayes' office had just ruled you out of pictures."

He grunted. "It's that screwy cousin of yours. You talked me into giving Hobbs a part in that 'Air Trails' picture, and now he's walking out."

She stared. "Walking out? But I thought he was doing swell!"

Lennox' voice was bitter. "That's the trouble. He did so well that they built

not on the lot. Know where I can find him?"

She hesitated. "He might be over at the La Paloma. There's a dancer over there that he's interested in."

Lennox said, "I'll give him something else to be interested in," and turned toward the gate.

The girl caught his arm. "Wait a minute. I'll go with you. Frank's hot tempered and if you rub him the wrong way he's just stubborn enough to do anything. Maybe it runs in the family. Anyway, I've got my car outside."

Lennox followed her to the car and climbed in.

The La Paloma was a big brick building below Alameda. It was a poor location for a night club—on the wrong end of town—but it was beginning to get a play, even from the movie trade. The atmosphere was authentic Mexican, the cooking good and the entertainment swell.

Nancy swung her car into the sparsely filled parking lot.

"They don't get much business in the afternoons," she explained, "but you should see the place at night. It's a regular mad house. They didn't expect it to be, when they started. It's owned by some revolutionists who were on the wrong side of things in the last scrap below the Border. Frank was one of the aviators for those rebels, you know."

Lennox nodded. He was much more interested in getting the 'Air Trails' picture finished than he was in Mexican politics. He said, "Come on. Let's find Frank," and led the way toward the entrance.

A dark-haired girl in native Mexican costume took his hat at the checkroom and they went through an arch into the big dining-room beyond. A Mexican orchestra played on a raised platform. A dozen couples swayed on the big dance floor, looking lost, almost forlorn, in the large, gloomy room. A waiter appeared, smiled as he recognized Nancy.

"Ah, *señorita*. You are welcome."

Nancy nodded. "Is Frank Hobbs around?"

The waiter shrugged. "I have not seen him today. Perhaps he is in the bar."

Nancy thanked him and she and Lennox mounted the stairs to a carpeted second floor to a long, cool barroom.

Booths lined one wall and the bar extended the whole length of the other. Three white-coated bartenders lounged at the far end. Only one of the booths was occupied. Nancy approached the bar.

"Seen Frank Hobbs?"

A tall, dark man with a knife scar across the bridge of his nose shook a pock-marked face. "We have not seen him today, *señorita*."

The girl hesitated. "Is Rita here?"

The man nodded. "You wish her?"

"If she isn't busy. We'll wait over here. Make me a Tom Collins."

Lennox said, "Same," and they went to the booth.

The girl who came through the small door at the end of the bar was stunning in the bright costume she wore. Her skin was creamy velvet, her hair blue-black, her features classic. As she saw Nancy her face lighted and she almost ran forward.

"Nancy!"

Nancy rose. "Rita, darling. You take my breath every time I see you."

The girl laughed, a tiny embarrassed sound. "You are too good, but it is nice to see you, my friend." She spoke English without a trace of accent, but awkwardly. "Too long have you stayed away."

Nancy said, "Business! Anyhow this funny looking mugg is Bill Lennox. Maybe you've heard of him?"

The girl inspected Lennox with the simplicity of a child. "I have heard such nice things, and he is not funny looking. Me, I think he is very nice."

Lennox smiled in spite of himself. "There! You see," he told Nancy. "You don't appreciate me."

Nancy made room for the girl at her side. "I have to keep him in his place," she said, smiling, then sobered. "We want to see Frank, Rita. Have you heard from him today?"

The girl shook her head. "Your cousin is angry with me because I cannot come to his party. He will not understand that I have to work."

Nancy nodded. "Listen, Rita. Have you any idea what Frank is up to? Bill got him that job in pictures and he was doing swell. Now he's trying to run out before the picture is finished. If he

leaves now he'll never get another job in Hollywood."

Lennox thought the girl's dark eyes filmed suddenly, then she brightened and was gay again.

"Surely you mistake. That is not like Frank."

Nancy agreed. "It isn't. Well, if he isn't here, we'll have to run."

Rita stood up. "I must go now, but finish your drinks. I will see you later." She was gone, leaving them sipping their drinks, staring silently at each other.

Finally Bill said, "Who is she?"

Nancy said, "She's the dancer here. Her father is General Rodriguez, the one who led that last revolution. When he and his followers escaped to the United States after the revolt collapsed, they started this place. She's a nice kid."

Lennox agreed, his eyes narrowing suddenly as two men slid through the door at the end of the bar, paused for an instant, then came toward the booth.

Lennox' voice was colorless as he spoke. "Hello, Morgan."

Butcher Morgan was large, well over six feet, weighing a good two-twenty with not an ounce of fat on his hard-muscled body. The man at his side was smaller, coming hardly to Morgan's shoulder.

Morgan nodded. "Hello, Lennox. Mind if we sit down?" He did not wait for an invitation, but crowded in at Lennox' side.

The smaller man remained standing. For an instant his mask of a face cracked in a tiny smile of recognition for the girl. "Good day, Miss Hobbs!"

She said, "This is a surprise. Bill, do you know General Rodriguez?"

Lennox shook hands, his face not betraying his racing thoughts as he tried to figure out what an exiled Mexican patriot was doing with Butcher Morgan.

He knew Morgan well, had known him for years, ever since the man's liquor boat had supplied thirsty Hollywood during prohibition, but he hadn't seen Morgan for three years. He'd heard that the

man had turned legitimate and built up a very profitable business in domestic wines.

The General was ill at ease. Morgan was cool, calm, collected as always. He smiled, his thick lips drawing back in what he thought was a gesture of good humor.

"Look, Bill. We've always been friends, haven't we?"

Lennox' voice was flat. "Friends?"

Dull red came up under Morgan's thick skin. "Oh. So, you want it that way?"

Lennox said, "What way?" There was a prickly sensation at the back of his neck. "What do you want, Morgan?"

Morgan said, tonelessly, "I want you to leave Frank Hobbs alone. He's got a little job to do, a little job that only he can do. It's important."

Lennox' eyes never flickered. "The picture he's working on is important, too."

Morgan laughed, sound without mirth. "It depends on what you call important. I'm not kidding, Bill. I know you and I don't want trouble with you, so I'm giving it to you straight. Don't mess into this. Nothing'll stop us, and the guy that tries will get hurt. Shelve your picture for a couple of weeks. I know it costs dough, but you and General Consolidated both aren't big enough to monkey into this game. Nobody's going to change Frank's mind. He's going through with this deal, and he's going to like it."

Nancy caught her breath sharply. "Listen to me, Butcher Morgan," she said angrily. "I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't care, and I'm telling you right now that I'll see that Frank finishes that picture."

Lennox patted her hand. "Easy, kid."

Morgan said, "That's right, Bill. Tell her I'm not joking." He rose, his big body giving the impression of driving power. "Come on, Rodriguez."

The general looked unhappy, more ill

at ease. He hesitated for a moment, then moved after Morgan.

Nancy said sharply, "Of all the nerve! When I see Frank—"

Lennox told her, flatly. "You're not even going to mention it. You're going to keep out of things, kid. Morgan is no one to monkey with. He means exactly what he says."

She stared at him. "You mean you're going to let him get away with it? You're going to let Frank walk out on the picture?"

Lennox told her, "I didn't say that. But I'll do the talking. Will Frank be at his apartment tonight?"

She nodded. "He and Mike Farnero are giving a party. They live in the same building."

He looked at her. "Mike?"

She nodded. "Yes, you know. The man who's working with Frank on the picture. He was in Mexico with him."

Lennox nodded. "I remember now. I hate to crash the party, but—"

She said, "You won't be crashing. I was going to ask you anyway. Meet me over at Frank's about eight. I've got to go over early and help to get things ready. And, Bill, don't let Frank do whatever Morgan wants him to. I don't like him mixed up with this crowd."



HE APARTMENT house where Hobbs and Farnero lived was a three-storied, built around an open court, with balconies for halls. Lennox parked his coupé in the basement garage, mounted to the third floor and went along the balcony toward the far end.

He paused before the apartment door and knocked. Beyond the door a radio played loudly, filling the air with discordant sound. He knocked again, got no response and tried the knob. It turned under his hand and he pushed it open.

The room inside was crowded, a jumbled mass of color and shouted con-

versation. Over it all the radio blared endlessly. No one seemed to give it heed, no one seemed to notice Lennox in the open doorway. He stood still for a moment, his eyes sweeping the room, then he saw Frank Hobbs against the far wall talking to a tall blonde.

The flyer was chubby, short. His boyish pink and white face was flushed. His eyes were bright as he turned, then they filmed as he saw Lennox.

"Hello, Bill." It wasn't that he lacked cordiality, but there was an odd note in his voice.

Lennox wanted a chance to talk to the flyer alone. He steered Frank into the kitchen, sensing that Hobbs was not anxious to go. He shut the swinging door to keep out some of the noise.

"What's this I hear about you walking out on the studio?"

Hobbs stirred uncomfortably. "Look, Bill. I told Spurck I'd get back just as soon as I could."

Lennox grunted. "And in the meanwhile we hold up a million dollar production. What do you have to go for? Where do you have to go? Don't you think you owe us some explanation, at least. Why the mystery?"

Hobbs twisted his glass uncertainly. The blonde came through the swinging door.

She said, brightly, "Oh, there you are," and practically threw herself into Hobbs' arms.

He seemed glad to have her there, glad to be relieved of the necessity of answering Lennox' questions. He said, "Look, Bill. I'll talk to you later. Why don't you go down and get Nancy?"

Lennox stared at him. "Go get her? Where is she?"

Hobbs said, "She went down to get Mike fifteen minutes ago. Better go watch your girl friend, Mike's the devil with women. He lives downstairs at the front—212." He turned to the ice-box and started to mix the blonde's drink.

Lennox stared at him for a moment, then swung on his heel and left the

apartment. He went down the stairs and walked along the balcony toward the door of 212 and knocked.

Nancy's voice called, "Who is it?"

He said, "Bill. Come on, they're yelling for you guys upstairs."

The door swung open and he got a look at her face. It was white, strained. A moment later she was in his arms and he was staring beyond her at the still figure on the rug beside the wall couch.

He swore under his breath, pushed her away from him, stepped in and closed the door, then he crossed to kneel beside the body.

He had only seen Mike Farnero once but he recognized the tall flyer instantly. The man wore a sports coat and no vest. The shirt was a polo type with V collar of tan linen, but on the left side, over the heart, there was a blotch of red, slowly turning black around the edges. The body was still warm, but there was no sign of life.

She was watching him, her hands clenched at her sides. "Is he—dead?"

Lennox rose slowly, nodded, then his eyes focused on her right hand, staring at the gun. "Nancy!"

She looked at her hand, looked at the gun in it as if she had never seen it before. "Bill! It was on the floor. I picked it up, close to the door."

He said, "Sure," and took it from her. "You shouldn't have picked it up, kid."

She nodded. "I know. I picked it up before I came all the way in. I knocked on the door, got no answer and tried the knob. It was unlocked and I pushed it open. The first thing I saw was the gun, then I saw Mike over there. Then you rapped on the door."

Lennox stared at her. "Your cousin told me you'd been down here for fifteen or twenty minutes."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "Bill Lennox! Are you suspecting me of murder?"

His voice roughened. "Don't be a damn fool. I'm trying to get things lined up. After all, we have to talk to the

cops, and although my cop pal, Spellman, may like you he's not in love with you."

She nodded. "Sorry, but this has shaken me up. I've known Mike for years, ever since Frank and he and I were kids together. I did come down about twenty minutes ago. The ginger ale was getting low."

"I walked over to the drugstore on Sunset to get some more. The place was closed. I came up here to get the keys to Mike's car so I could drive over to the all-night market. When he didn't answer I assumed he'd gone upstairs, but I thought his keys might be on his desk. That's why I came on in. When I saw him lying there I . . ." She stared down at the quiet form.

Lennox looked at the gun. It was a thirty-two, a snub-nosed, cheap, mail-order gun. He handled it gingerly, his mind busy trying to map a course of action. He wished that the girl had not picked it up; that her finger-prints weren't on the nicked surface. He was almost tempted to wipe it with his handkerchief. He hated to see Nancy subjected to the grilling of the police and reporters, but he knew that, by lying, he might only make things worse. He turned and went toward the phone.

Nancy's voice reached him sharply. "What are you going to do, Bill?"

Lennox answered, tonelessly, "Call the police." He picked up the receiver.

"Call the police? No, Bill! Wait! I'm scared. Wait a little."

Bill shook his head. "I'd like to, kid, but I'm afraid it won't work. That gang upstairs knows that you and I came down here to get Farnero. They're bound to talk. The best thing we can do is to play it straight. I'll call Spellman and get him up here. He's bull-headed, but he's a good cop."

She nodded. "Sorry, Bill. I lost my head. Go ahead and phone."

Lennox obeyed, said into the instrument, "Is Spellman there? Yeah, Floyd? Bill Lennox. There's been a killing out at—" He gave the number. "Yeah.

Flyer named Farnero. That's right. Someone got him in the chest. . . . No, I didn't exactly find the body, but I almost did. I'll explain when you get here." He hung up and turned around to find the girl watching him.

"What do we do now?"

He shrugged. "Wait."

Somewhere a clock ticked, the only noise in the apartment. Above, the radio blared into the night. Nancy moved restlessly.

"I wish they'd shut that thing off." Her voice told the strain under which she was laboring.

Lennox put an arm about her shoulders. "Steady, kid. Spellman will be here in a little while. Any idea who would kill Mike?"

She shook her head. "Not the slightest."

Lennox' eyes were on the stained left breast. "Well, someone did." He went over and sank into a chair. "Relax, honey. It won't do any good to get the jitters." They waited. . . .

There was noise of a car below, heavy feet tramped up the stairs, came along the balcony. Someone knocked.



SPELLMAN was big, short-necked, bullet-headed captain of detectives. He nodded to Bill, started as he saw the girl. "Hello, Nancy."

She said, "Hello, Floyd."

Spellman looked toward the body. "Who is he?"

Lennox told him. "Nancy came back from the store and up here for Farnero's keys. She found the gun just inside the door and picked it up. Her prints are still on it."

The red in Spellman's face deepened. "Look, Bill. I've known you and Nancy for a long time. How about coming clean?"

Lennox' mouth tightened. "Just what are you getting at?"

Spellman, for once in his life, seemed uncertain. "I—Well, if she came up here and this guy made a pass or something, and she—"

Lennox said, sharply, "Nothing like that. She didn't shoot Mike. They were pals, they grew up together. If I'd thought she was implicated, don't you think I'd have wiped her prints off this rod and had her scram out of here?"

Spellman said, "Sure, sure." He was staring down at the gun. "Where's this guy Hobbs?"

Lennox shrugged. "Upstairs at the party, I guess."

Spellman turned to one of his men. "Bring him down."

They stood around waiting. Frank Hobbs hurried into the room. He'd had several drinks and they showed in his eyes, then he saw Farnero and he was suddenly sober, on his knees beside his friend.

"Mike! Mike!"

Spellman seized him and jerked him back with a big hand. Hobbs swung around fighting. Spellman held him easily as a child.

"Don't touch anything. Get it?" He let the flyer go.

Hobbs looked at his cousin, then Lennox. "What happened. Who got Mike?"

Bill shook his head. "We don't know. Nancy found him like that."

Frank Hobbs' face was a mask of repression. "If they—" His fists bulged at his sides.

Spellman was watching him. "If who?"

The flyer shook his head. "Nothing."

Spellman exploded. "What the hell is going on here? Listen, if you think that just because you know me, and that you work for the studio. . . ." He was shouting at Lennox.

Bill said, "Save it."

"Save it, hell." He swung back to face Hobbs. "Listen, you. Ever see this before?" He extended the gun.

Hobbs nodded. "Sure. It was Mike's. He took it off a drunk in an east side

joint a couple of months ago. But I don't know who used it."

The Detective Captain said, "You didn't, of course?"

The flyer stared at him. "Are you trying to be funny?"

Spellman nodded. "Sure. I go around cracking wise whenever we have a murder. I'm funny that way. Now get this, mugg. I don't like your attitude."

Hobbs' mouth had a circle of whiteness. Lennox grabbed his shoulder as the flyer started to heave forward.

"Hold it!" His tone was curt. "We're not getting any place with this. You guys aren't staging a battle. You're trying to find out who killed Mike."

Hobbs said, in a milder tone, "Then make the big lug lay off me."

Spellman's face gained a bloated appearance. "Lug! I'll show you who's a lug. When'd you see Farnero last?"

Hobbs hesitated. "At dinner. We all had dinner together. Nancy and I went ahead up to my place to get things ready. Mike had a couple of letters he wanted to write. He said he'd be up around eight."

Spellman was trying to be subtle. "And you never left the party? You didn't come down here—sneak down?"

Hobbs stared at him, anger again glinting in his eyes, darkening them. "I did not."

Spellman turned to one of his men. "I'm going upstairs, Harry. Hold these people until I get back." He was gone, slamming the door.

Lennox lit a cigarette, told Hobbs in a low tone, "Don't rub Floyd the wrong way. He's a good guy when you know him, but if he gets an idea he never gets rid of it."

The chubby flyer sounded surly. "Then tell him to lay off. I didn't kill Mike. I want his murderer a lot more than that big-footed mugg does."

Lennox sounded dry. "You haven't been exactly helpful. You were going to tell him something, then you didn't."

Hobbs said, "Because it was a screwy idea. It wouldn't help and it might hurt

a lot of people. I—" He broke off as Spellman came back through the door. He looked pleased, like a cat that had just found a full mouse trap.

"I thought you said you didn't leave the party upstairs?"

Hobbs' face set. "Well?"

The Detective Captain spoke slowly. "They tell me that you did; that you were gone almost fifteen minutes, and that you'd been back only a few minutes when Lennox came to the door."

Nancy stared miserably at her cousin.

Hobbs said, "They're mistaken. I stepped out onto the balcony for a minute to see why Nancy and Mike weren't coming, but I went back in. I wasn't out more than a couple of minutes or so."

Lennox, watching the flyer, knew suddenly that Hobbs was lying. He wasn't sure that Spellman knew, but Hobbs' voice wasn't natural. It was forced, too positive.

The detective turned toward the coroner's man. "How long has he been dead, Doc?"

The man shrugged. "Not long. I'd say he was killed around ten, maybe a little earlier."

Spellman swung about. "What about prints on the gun?"

The man said, "Can't tell exactly, Captain, but there seems to be only one set—a woman's, I'd say, and some blurred ones at the end of the barrel."

"Those'll be mine," Lennox told him. "I picked it up that way."

"Woman's, huh?" Spellman glowered at Nancy.

Lennox said, sharply, "Don't be a sap. I told you that she had the gun in her hand when I came in. And get this, Floyd. That gun's been lying around for months. It would have a lot of prints on it except for one thing."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"The murderer—whoever it was—wiped off the gun after he shot Farnero. Otherwise there'd be a whole raft of prints on it. As it is, there are just mine and hers."

Spellman said, "She might have wiped it off."

Lennox stared at him. "Are you nuts? Why in the hell would she wipe it off?"

The Detective Captain shrugged. "Well, she might do it if she were covering up for someone, perhaps her—" The door slammed open and the blonde Lennox had seen with Hobbs barged into the room.

She was more than a little drunk, and fended off the homicide men with a dignity which was almost comical. She pushed her way forward until she faced Spellman.

"Ju wanna know who killed Mike Farnero? I know."

They all stared at her. "He did." She turned and pointed dramatically at Frank Hobbs. "He did it."

Spellman barked, "Where'd you get that idea?"

She said owlishly, "Didn't. Mike told me. Mike said Frank was damn fool. Said Frank was screwy and that he wasn't going to let him walk out on studio."

Spellman swung on Lennox. "What's this about Hobbs walking out on the studio?"

Bill hesitated. "Nothing. Just a little matter which we'll get ironed out. Farnero didn't have anything to do with it."

Spellman rapped, "Then where did this dame get the idea?"

Lennox said, with obvious disgust. "Out of a bottle. I don't even know who she is."

The blonde said, "Mike's girl." She was very grave, very positive about it, then she collapsed into the nearest cop's arms.

Spellman shrugged. "That cinches it." "Cinches what?" Lennox was staring at him.

"We hold Hobbs."

Nancy's eyes met Bill's wide, urgent. They said more plainly than words, "Do something! You've got to do something."

He nodded to show her that he understood, turned and going to the phone,

called Sam Marx. The lawyer sounded sleepy, but he promised to meet them at Headquarters.



MORNING sunlight drew a pattern across the carpet in Spellman's office as Lennox walked in. The Detective Captain looked up and grunted a welcome which had no pleasure in it.

"What do you want?"

Lennox said, "Two things. I want you to free Frank Hobbs, and if you won't do that, I want you to let him come out to the studio. We've got ten more days shooting on the picture and we've got to have him."

"You're nuts. You can't use a murderer in pictures and get away with it. The Hayes office would kill it in a minute."

"He isn't a murderer. You can't show me one motive which would stand up."

Spellman's smile was thick with satisfaction. "We've got the best motive in the world, wise guy. Greed. Farnero left half of everything he owned to Hobbs."

Lennox was laughing suddenly. Spellman stared at him suspiciously. "What's so funny about that?"

Lennox said, "Everything. You, mostly. The idea that a tramp flyer would have any dough at all is crazy enough, but that Mike Farnero could have had enough to make someone kill him to get it is really one for the book."

Spellman nodded. "O. K., wise guy. Get a load of this. I've talked to the lawyer that drew Farnero's will last week. It seems that two years ago when Mike and Frank Hobbs were fighting for the revolutionists below the Line, Mike saved the life of a big ranchero. This mugg died recently, and he left Mike over a million in good old American dollars. Frank Hobbs gets half of that. A nephew of Mike's in San Diego gets the

rest. This nephew is flying up here this morning."

For an instant Lennox was too surprised to speak, then he said, slowly, "That doesn't even make sense. Farnero and Hobbs were buddies. If Frank had wanted dough, Mike would have given him the whole works. He didn't have to kill him."

Spellman shrugged. "That's not the way the blonde tells it. We finally got her sober and she talked. Mike and Hobbs have been rowing for over a week."

"What about?"

The Homicide chief spread his hands. "Better go and ask Hobbs. Maybe you can get it out of him."

Lennox rose. "That's exactly what I'm going to do." He left the detective's office, rode up in the elevator and asked to see the flyer. A call from Spellman had him admitted and a few minutes later he was talking to the prisoner.

Hobbs was pacing back and forth across the small cell. "I've got to get out of here, Bill. I've got to find out something and I'm the only one who can do it."

Lennox told him, "You can make up your mind to one thing. You're not getting out until Mike's real killer is found. Spellman will see to that. He's got his thick head set on the idea that you're guilty. Tell me what you want done."

The flyer shook his head stubbornly. "Can't."

Lennox had difficulty keeping the anger out of his voice. "What's Butcher Morgan got to do with him—and Rodriguez?"

Hobbs started. "Where'd you get the idea that they had anything to do with it?"

Lennox told him. "It's your turn to start answering questions. Did Morgan or the General kill Farnero?"

The flyer hesitated. "I don't know," then his chubby face hardened. "Keep out of this, Lennox. This is my business. Let me take care of it my way."

Bill told him, harshly, "I've got a stake in this too. Remember, there's half a million of General Consolidated's money tied up in a picture that we can't finish without you. And I'm the one who got you the job. This other job Morgan and Rodriguez want you to do—Is it flying for them to Mexico? Maybe flying guns?"

Hobbs frowned, lowered his eyes, refused to answer. "Look, Bill. I'm a heel, I'm anything you want to call me, but do one thing. Send Nancy down here. I've got to talk to her."

Lennox gave up and left the cell. He rode the elevator to the street and took a cab to the studio. There was a memo on his desk that Spurck wanted to see him as soon as he came in. He went into the production chief's office.

Spurck looked like Napoleon at the rout of Waterloo. "So, you find time to come to the office yet. Positivel, you would think you do us a favor, working here."

Spurck sat down. He was short and always felt at a disadvantage when standing. "Last night I tell you Hobbs is walking out with half the picture in the can already, and you promise to fix it. You fix it! Not only has he walked out on us, but now the *schliemel* is mixed up with a murder yet. A fine business! A colossal business, for a man with high blood pressure. *Oi!*"

Lennox was getting sore. "I've been downtown all morning trying to straighten things out. Hobbs won't talk, but I don't think he killed Farnero."

"You don't think! Does that re-shoot the picture? Does that find us another flyer?"

"Pour it on. I'm doing the best I can."

"And I say," Spurck said triumphantly, "that best is not yet good enough. Look, Bill. Hire the best detectives; find out who this killer is and get this Hobbs out from jail, but when you get him, hang on to him till we finish with all the retakes. That is all. We are positively depending on you. D'ya understand?"



LENNOX rode in a cab out to Nancy Hobbs'. The fan writer looked tired when she opened the door and led the way into the living-room. There was a man in the chair beside the window.

Nancy said, "This is Arthur Farnero, Bill. Arthur is Mike's nephew. They wired him and he flew up from San Diego this morning."

Farnero was tall, thick through the shoulders, and black-haired. He shook hands, said, "This knocks me over, Mr. Lennox. I saw Mike last week."

Bill nodded. "I understand how you feel. Any idea as to who might have done it?"

Farnero hesitated. "Several. Mike had a sarcastic way at times. A lot of people have been burnt up about it."

The girl cut in: "Have you seen Frank, Bill?"

"Yes, I was there this morning. He wants to see you. I wish your cousin would talk. He told me that he didn't kill Mike and I don't think he's lying, but he does know something, or has an idea."

Her voice was impatient. "Of course he didn't kill Mike. Why, he'd as soon kill me."

Arthur Farnero said, "What if I went and talked to him. After all, it's my business, too. He might talk to me."

Lennox looked at him. "You might try it. It can't hurt anything. By the way, you saw your uncle the other day. I don't suppose he said anything that might help?"

Farnero shrugged. "I don't remember. We were talking about some of the men we used to know in Mexico. I was with him down there, you know." He smiled. "It was fun while it lasted, but it didn't last long. We had some old crates—the wings used to fall off every time we took them up." He rose and said, "Will you come over to Mike's

apartment with me for a second? I'd like to look around."

"All right." Lennox was on his feet. "I'll be back in a little while," he told Nancy, and followed Farnero down the steps and to Mike's apartment.

The policeman at the door nodded as he saw Lennox and let them into the apartment.

Once inside, Farnero said, "I wanted to talk to you without Nancy hearing what I had to say."

Lennox stared at him in surprise. Farnero went on, "I want you to understand. Mike had a bad temper, and when he was mad he said things that he regreted later. Well, I know that he was sore at Frank. Some of the revolutionists we fought for in Mexico have been talking to Frank, Mike didn't tell me last week what they wanted, but I can guess."

"There's trouble starting down there. They wanted Mike to go, but he wouldn't listen. Frank did. He's in love with the daughter of one of the leaders. He promised them he'd do something—Mike didn't tell me what it was—but after they started working in pictures, Mike wanted Frank to pull out of the revolution. Frank wouldn't do it. Said he'd promised, and that he wouldn't break his word."

"They've been arguing for two weeks. I think maybe they started again last night; that Mike may have said something to make Frank sore and he grabbed the gun, then Mike struggled with him and it went off."

Lennox was watching. "That's not what the cops think. They think Frank killed Mike for the money."

"Money! What money?" Farnero's voice was high with surprise.

Lennox stared. "Haven't you heard? Mike inherited plenty from some man whose life he saved below the Line. I think you are mentioned in the will."

"The devil!" Farnero ran a hand across his eyes. "I'll have to look into that. I haven't had a chance to see Mike's lawyer, but what I'm trying to say is—I like Frank and I'm very fond of Nancy."

I know what Mike would want me to do. I just wanted to tell you that whether Hobbs is guilty or not, I'll help him as much as I can. I'm going down to the jail."

Lennox didn't say anything. He followed Farnero to the street and watched the man get into his cab, then he went back up the block to the girl's apartment.



VOICES reached him through the thin panel of Nancy's door. He rapped and for an instant there was silence within, then footsteps. Nancy opened the door.

"Oh, it's you." She seemed puzzled, a little surprised as if she hadn't expected him back so quickly.

He followed her in, started as he recognized the slight man in the big chair across the room. The man rose quickly and made a bow, stiffly from the hips.

Nancy said, "You remember General Rodriguez, don't you, Bill?"

"I remember the General extremely well."

The General smiled briefly. "Ah, Mr. Lennox. The pleasure is all mine."

Lennox looked from the General to the girl, puzzled. "And to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit, General?"

The General spread his hands. "I fear that Mr. Lennox does not like me." He was addressing the girl. "Still, *señorita*, I trust that you will do what I ask. I assure you that it will be the best for all of us."

Lennox's voice was flat, final. "Listen, Rodriguez, and get this straight once and for all. Nancy's not doing anything for you. She's keeping entirely clear of this mess."

The General hesitated for a moment. Then: "It's unfortunate that you take that attitude, Mr. Lennox. It would be much better for all of us if you would cooperate." His voice was soft, silky with hidden threat. "What we do is so

big that no one man, or group of men, can stand in the way."

Lennox said, his jaw set: "I'm telling you to keep Miss Hobbs out of this. I mean exactly that, General. Good-by!" He turned and held the door open.

Rodriguez' shrug was expressive. "So sorry." He made a stiff bow and went out.

Lennox shut the door. The girl's eyes were on him as he lowered his voice. "What did that guy want?"

She said, "He wanted me to go down and see Frank. He said for Frank to tell me where they were hidden."

Lennox' eyes narrowed. "Where what were hidden?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I'd better do it. Maybe I'd find out from Frank what this is all about. Maybe then Morgan and Rodriguez would leave Frank alone."

Lennox said, "Nothing doing. You're keeping clear out of this. I'll handle Morgan and the General. I'll handle Frank, too. Now listen, Nancy, this is serious. I think it would be very, very wise if you got out of town."

She said, "But I can't now. Don't forget I work for a living; that I've got a deadline to meet."

He said, "I'm not forgetting anything, but it's better to be alive and fail to make a deadline, than it is to be dead. Get your things together and get the afternoon train for 'Frisco. I'm going back to the jail and talk to that screwy cousin of yours. It's about time he got next to himself."

She said, "But I—" "Now listen," he said. "For once, do as I tell you without arguing. I don't know Rodriguez, but I do know Morgan. If that mugg sets his head on doing anything he'll do it, and a little thing like murder wouldn't stop him. You get your bag packed and get out of here. When you get to 'Frisco, go to the Saint Francis. I'll call you long distance tomorrow and let you know what's going on." He turned to go.

His voice softened. "So long, kid. Take care of yourself."

She said, "But, Bill, if it's dangerous for me, maybe it's dangerous for you, too."

He shrugged. "I don't think so. I've been up against Morgan's kind and came through. Anyway, what they want is something from Frank, not me. They're evidently afraid to go down to the jail and see him themselves. I used to think they wanted him to fly for them for some revolutionist reason, but now I think it's something deeper."

She said, "Do you think they killed Mike?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I've got to figure some way to get Frank out of jail. I've got to get him clear so that we can finish that damned movie. So long." He closed the door and went along the balcony.

As he came down the steps onto the sidewalk, he saw a car parked at the curb beyond a row of huge palms. But he hardly glanced at it until Rodriguez' voice stopped him.

"Lennox!"

Bill turned his head. The General said, "Come over here a minute. I want to speak to you."

Bill did not move. A man came around one of the palms. There was a small gun in his hand that glinted viciously in the sun.

"Get in the car!"

Lennox walked across the wide parking. Butcher Morgan was in the back seat. The General was standing beside the open door.

"Get in." Rodriguez held no gun, but he did not need one. The man with the gun was still at Lennox' back. Bill got in.

Morgan smiled. "You're being difficult, Lennox. If you'd used your head this wouldn't have been necessary."

Bill said, "These aren't the old racket days, Butcher, when mobsters' guns made their own law. You haven't got a chance to get away with this and you

know it. This is about the dumbest play I ever heard of."

Morgan said, "Not so dumb. Don't worry. We're not going to do anything as crude as kill you. We're just going to lock you up out of the way until you can't do us any more harm."

Lennox stared at him. The man with the gun had walked around the car and crawled in beside the driver. Rodriguez was in the back seat at Lennox' left side. The car rolled away from the curb.

Lennox said, "What's the game anyway, Butcher? You can't buy yourself anything by cooping me up. After all, I haven't got Frank Hobbs. The cops have him and Spellman is pretty bull-headed."

Morgan nodded. "All we want to do is to get a message through to Hobbs."

Lennox said, "What message?"

"That," Morgan told him, "is our business. But whoever tries to stop us gets—hurt."

Lennox' eyes narrowed. "Like Mike Farnero got his?"

The big man shrugged. "You don't think we killed Farnero, do you? Why should we kill him?"

Bill said, "Because he was blocking your game, whatever it is, because he wouldn't let Frank Hobbs go through with whatever he planned; because he was tryin to make Frank finish the picture."

The big man laughed. "That's where you're wrong. I don't know who killed Farnero, and I don't care. All I want to do is get Hobbs out of jail and I am going to get him out." He leaned forward, said to the driver, "Let us out at the next corner, Harry. Then take Lennox out to the house and keep him there until you hear from me."

The car pulled to the curb. Rodriguez and Morgan got out. The man with the gun had it resting on the back of the front seat. It was pointed directly at Lennox.

Morgan said to the driver, "After you've taken Lennox out to the house

come on back here. Rodriguez and I are going to talk to the girl. If she won't listen to reason we'll pick her up too."

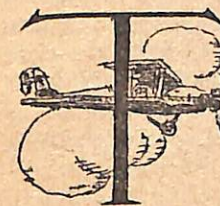
Lennox stared at them. "Hey, wait!"

Morgan shook his head. "Nothing stirring, Bill. You had your chance to play ball. Now we're going to do it my way."

Lennox started forward. The man with the gun grinned wolfishly. "Easy, punk. I always did want to shoot a big shot."

Lennox stared at the man. He had chalk-like eyes, set in a flat, unimaginative face. His lips had a sardonic grin. He said, "I ain't shot nobody for three years." He sounded as if he was a little disappointed about it.

The car began to move. Morgan was standing on the curb laughing. General Rodriguez hadn't said a word, but Lennox knew he would get no help from him.



HE house sat far up on the hills above Los Feliz, far apart from any others. The man with the gun grinned at Lennox.

"You might as well make yourself at home, sport. You've got a long wait." He was in a chair between Lennox and the door, the gun on a small table at his side.

Lennox sat down on a couch. Morgan evidently did himself well. The house looked like money. The furniture was new and very modern—the bar alone must have cost a thousand dollars. Lennox' eyes were on the bar.

He said, "Mind if I help myself to a drink?"

The man waved a large hand. "Why not? Butcher paid for it."

Lennox walked across, put whiskey into a tall glass, coated it with soda and downed it at a gulp. It steadied his nerves, but increased the heat of his body. It was already hot in the room.

The afternoon sun beat in through the full length windows. A telephone bell rang, sharp discordant sound in the quiet house.

The guard rose to answer it, taking his gun with him. Lennox' eyes measured the west window. It was possible to throw himself through it, but just beyond was a retaining wall—forty feet of sheer concrete. He couldn't drop over it and live.

The man was at the far corner talking into the French phone. He said, "Yeah, I got him. Sure, quiet as a baby. . . . I'll tell him, chief." He replaced the phone in its cradle.

"They got your girl friend, punk. Morgan thought you might wanna know."

Lennox said, "That's sweet of Morgan," and poured himself another drink.

The man with the gun stretched and yawned. He said, "I don't like this business much. It's too ticklish. If them saps hadn't voted for repeal we'd still been in a good racket."

Lennox eyed him thoughtfully and made a shrewd guess. He said, "Instead of helping with revolutions?"

The man looked at him sharply. "Oh, so you know that?"

Lennox shrugged. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it? Rodriguez's been kicked out of Mexico twice. He'd like to go back again. What I don't figure is, where Morgan comes in."

The man yawned. "That's because you're not smart and Butcher is. Butcher looks ahead." He yawned again. "This is a hell of a thing, having to sit around and play nursemaid to you. How about a game of pinocle?"

Lennox said, "Swell! Anything's better than sitting here. But I warn you, I'm probably the best pinocle player that ever came out of Chicago."

The guard's lips twisted. "Oh, yeah? Well, I'm the best one that ever came from New York. And New York's bigger than Chicago ever thought of being. . . ."

The guard won steadily. He was a hundred and twelve dollars ahead and very satisfied with himself.

He said, "So, you're the best pinocle player that ever came out of Chicago? I always did say that was a hick town."

Lennox didn't answer. He picked up the deck of cards riffing them, his long fingers making a perfect arch of the pasteboards. "Did you ever see this one?" He took the deck, made a rainbow effect with the flying cards.

The guard said, "Not bad. But I'm still winning. I—" He broke off as Lennox suddenly flipped the whole deck directly into his eyes, a stream of flying cards, the sharp edges blinding him.

The man swore, pushed back, his hand clawing for the gun on the table at his elbow. But Lennox had heaved forward, caught the edge of the heavy table, jerked it upward. It went over, sending the gun scuttling to the carpet, pinning the man to the floor, its edge across his chest, its weight holding him down.

Lennox twisted around the outstretched legs and snatched up the gun. "O. K., buddy. On your feet."

The guard swore and pushed the table away. As he got up slowly, his chalk-like eyes were pools of light blue flame, his face a white mask. "I'll kill you, punk."

Lennox told him, "You're not killing anybody at the moment. Turn around and go on up to the bathroom." He followed the man up the stairs. A white-coated Filipino boy was putting linen into a closet. He turned to look them over with wide, marble-like eyes.

Lennox motioned to him with the gun. "Over there." He shut the boy in the linen closet, turned the latch. Then he took the guard into the bathroom, made the man find a roll of tape. With the tape, he fastened the man's wrists and ankles securely, leaving his prisoner sitting on the bathroom floor, his back against the shower stall. Then he went into the hall and bound the Filipino. That done he left the house.

There was a Ford V-8 coupé in the garage, the keys in the lock. He started the motor, went sliding down the steep, winding road. His toe kicked the accelerator almost to the floor as he twisted the coupé through traffic.

His face was a tight mask. He was going to see Frank Hobbs and make the flyer talk. If Morgan had Nancy the time for all stalling was past and he was through stalling. He wheeled the car down the hill, jammed the brakes to stop at a signal. Then he became a witness to a jail break.

He saw Frank Hobbs come out of the building between two guards; saw a black car swing to the curb; saw two men step forward and jab guns into the guards' backs. Instinctively he shouted a warning, knowing, even as the sound issued from his lips, that the words would be lost in the noise of the afternoon traffic.

Then someone lifted Hobbs and almost pitched him into the black car. He saw the machine swerve away from the curb just as the signal changed. A brief glimpse of the driver told him it was the man who had driven him to the hilltop house.

Everything in the street was confusion; a taxi had pulled directly in front of the police car, blocking its path. The driver slid from under the cab wheel, jumped to the sidewalk and a moment later was lost in the crowd. The men who had held the guards motionless seemed to have melted into the throng. A moment later everything was as serene as if the snatch had not occurred. Sound of motor horns behind him made Lennox conscious of his surroundings.

He tooled the car forward, pulled into the curb, back of the cab, parked the wrong way, and climbed out onto the sidewalk.

Spellman dashed out of the door, turned as he saw Lennox. "So, it was you!" He was sputtering, hardly able to utter coherent sound. "So, you did

it! I'll break you, Bill, if it's the last thing I do."

Lennox jerked free from Spellman's grasp. "Don't be a damned fool, Floyd. I wouldn't pull a stunt like that, and you know it."

Spellman said, "The hell you wouldn't! You'd do anything to shoot that picture. Well, you're not going to shoot it. I'll throw the whole force onto the General lot. I'll see that a camera doesn't turn until we get Hobbs back into the can."

Lennox said, "Shut up a minute. You don't really think I'm a damned enough fool to get Hobbs out that way, do you?"

Spellman stared at him. The Detective Captain's eyes were small, very dark with rage. He controlled himself with a visible effort. "Then, how do you know so much about it?"

Lennox said, "I saw the whole thing. I was at the corner when it happened. But I didn't pull it."

Spellman said, "Who did?"

Lennox started to say, "Butcher Morgan," then stopped. He remembered suddenly that Morgan had Nancy Hobbs. He didn't know where she was and he didn't want the cops running around shooting wildly until he did. He said, "How would I know?"

Spellman had gained partial control of himself. He looked Lennox over with narrow eyes. "Listen, Bill. If you did plan this, I'll get you if it's the last thing I ever do. If you didn't, I want to know who did, and I'm going to find out. But there's one thing sure—this pretty well proves that Hobbs did kill Farnero."

Lennox said, "I'm not so sure of that."

"You're not so sure? I suppose an innocent man would take a chance on breaking jail?"

Lennox said, "I'm not so sure that Hobbs went willingly. From where I was, it looked as if he was pretty well thrown into that car. I'm going to find out about it."



ILL LENNOX remembered that Morgan's registration must be on the steering wheel of the coupé and he didn't want the cops nosing

around Butcher Morgan until he found out where Nancy was and got her out of the way. He drove the coupé away from the business district and took a cab to the La Paloma. Early diners were already thronging in—well dressed Mexicans and a sprinkling of Americans.

The head waiter came forward inquiringly and Lennox slid a five dollar bill into the man's ready hand.

"Tell Rita I want to see her. I'll wait in the bar upstairs."

The man's dark eyes filmed with caution. "I am not certain she is here, señor. Her first dance is not until ten."

Something in the man's manner made Bill think the waiter might be lying. He said, "It's important. She'll regret it if she misses me. See if you can find her."

He sat in one of the booths for fifteen minutes. He'd about decided that the waiter had told him the truth when he saw Rita come hurriedly through the door at the end of the bar. She came forward a little hesitantly, a little cautiously and paused beside the table. "You wished to see me, señor?"

He nodded. "You remember me, don't you? I was here with Miss Hobbs yesterday."

She bent her head slightly. He had the feeling that she was fending him off, holding him at sword's point.

He went on, "I thought I'd come over and tell you that Frank Hobbs escaped from jail this afternoon." He was watching her closely, but couldn't be certain whether or not the news surprised her.

He leaned closer. "I also came to tell you that Butcher Morgan and your father are holding Nancy Hobbs prisoner."

Her eyes flickered. "They are? Why?"

"I don't know but I suspect that they're planning to use the fact to force

Frank Hobbs to do something for them."

Her eyes were half closed. "And why do you tell me this?"

"Because I think you're a friend of Hobbs. I think that you're in love with him."

She started to speak, but he stopped her. "Wait. I still don't know what they want of Frank Hobbs, but I do know this. If you care anything about him at all, you'd better throw in and help me. He's suspected of murder. They broke him out of jail. Spellman, the head of the Homicide squad, is plenty red-headed about it. There's a general pick-up order out for Frank and I suspect the boys have been ordered to shoot to kill."

She drew her breath sharply. "But what can I do?"

He told her, tensely, "You can find out for me where they are holding Nancy Hobbs; where they are holding Frank."

"You ask a lot, *señor*."

"Not so much as you think. I don't care what your father's game is. He can promote all the revolutions he wants to."

Her eyes changed. "You know that? Frank told you?"

He said, "No one needed to tell me. It's easy enough to figure out. What I don't savvy is where Morgan comes into it." Watching her it seemed to him that she exhaled in relief.

Her words were careful, stilted. "Morgan is helping. He is our friend."

Lennox grunted. "No doubt he's your friend, but I'll bet my last dollar there's something in it for Butcher Morgan—you can be sure of that."

She said, rising, "I will see what I can do. No! It would be better if you came with me." She walked down the room, Lennox at her heels, pushed open the door at the end of the bar. It opened on a concrete-paved passage, the walls of rough brick. She led him down to a door at the end, shoved it open.

"If you will wait here a moment..."

He stepped past her, hesitated, started to turn, but he was too late. With surprising strength, the girl put a hand into

the center of his back and pushed. Lennox stumbled, trying to gain his balance, to swing around. But the door clicked shut before he could reach it and he heard the bolt shot into place.

He swore under his breath, grasped the knob and tried to pull it open, failed, then he turned back to examine his prison. The place was evidently a storeroom for the bar. Cases of bottled liquor were piled against the wall. A single fly-specked bulb gave what little light there was. There was nothing else in the room.

The weight of the gun he had taken from Morgan's man felt comforting in his pocket. He pulled it out, intending to drive a slug through the door's lock, then changed his mind. He didn't want to start anything yet, not until he found Nancy. He looked at the gun thoughtfully. Without doubt, the girl, Rita, had gone for help. That meant that he would be searched as soon as they returned. He tried to figure what to do with the gun.

It was too big to slide into the sleeve of his coat. Finally he stooped over, shoved it down into the top of his sock and pulled the supporter over the rubber grip. Unless he jiggled too much it would stay there. He'd hardly straightened when there was a noise at the door.

It opened and the chalk-eyed man with whom he'd played cards entered, with Morgan at his heels. The chalk-eyed man said, "Well, hell! This is pretty nice!" He was grinning evilly. "You owe me a hundred and twelve bucks, sport."

Lennox nodded. "That's right. I'm sorry I forgot about it, but I left in such a hurry."

Morgan grunted. "What's this?"

Lennox said, easily, "Just a gambling debt. Your boy friend's a good pinocle player. He should go in for it in a large way. But I can still show him a few tricks with a deck of cards."

The man swore. "You won't be so cocky when I get through working you over."

Morgan snapped, "Shut up and fan him."

The man stepped forward and ran a hand over Lennox, failed to find the gun. "He's clean." He found the leather billfold in Bill's hip pocket, drew it out, then he examined the contents and sucked his breath. "Two hundred and ninety dollars," he whistled. "That about makes us even. I'll keep the rest for interest."

"Stop clowning," Morgan told him sharply. "We've got work to do. Bring the punk along."

Lennox went down the hall between them, walking carefully. The gun against his leg was heavy, awkward. The room they entered was larger, better furnished than the storeroom.



NANCY HOBBS was in a straight chair against the wall. Her cousin sat on a big sofa, the handcuffs still on his wrists. Evidently the gang hadn't bothered to take them off. Rita was standing at his side, one hand about his shoulder.

Morgan walked over to Nancy's side, stood above her. "You've been holding out, Babe, saying that Lennox would do something. Well, here's Lennox, and he's not going to do a thing."

Her face was white, but she didn't open her mouth. Rita ran her hand through Frank Hobbs' hair. "Where are they, Frank *mio*? We have the boat waiting. There is no time to lose."

Hobbs' voice was sullen. "Tell me who killed Mike Farnero and I'll talk, but, until you do, I won't say a word. Who killed him?"

The dancer's dark eyes were unreadable. "You're being stupid. We did not kill Mike. Mike was our friend."

Hobbs glared at Morgan. "You're not kidding me. Both you and Rodriguez were talking to Mike when I went upstairs. You were arguing then. Which one of you killed him?"

The former liquor czar swore.

"You've got it wrong, Hobbs. Why the hell would we kill Farnero? The only argument we had with him was about you. He didn't want to fly our guns across the Border, and we wanted you to. That would have been a plenty dumb trick—for us to kill him, wouldn't it? What in the hell would we buy ourselves? You'd already agreed to go through with our deal."

Lennox said, "I thought you wanted him for flying and I guessed it was to fly guns."

They paid him no attention.

Hobbs shook his head stubbornly. "You don't get those guns until I find out who killed Mike."

Morgan's face changed. "Oke, if you want to be tough about it. We'll put a little pressure on you. You think a lot of your cousin, don't you?" He swung toward Nancy, motioned the chalk-eyed man forward.

"Get her shoes off, Pete. We'll see if a couple blistered feet will make Hobbs open up."

Lennox yelled, "Lay off that, Butcher. If you go pushing Nancy around, I'll make you wish—"

Morgan took two short strides and hit Lennox in the face. The blow knocked Lennox off balance, sent him crashing backwards into a chair.

Morgan snarled, "Shut up, you." He returned to the girl. "You've got one last chance. Tell your cousin to talk. We want those guns and we're going to get them. I ain't spent ten years collecting them for the fun of the thing. Either tell us where they are, or we'll see how you like the hot foot."

Nancy remained mute, rigid in the chair. All eyes were off Lennox for the moment. He slowly raised his leg. With his left hand he pulled up the trouser; with his right he ripped the blue automatic free of the garter.

"O. K., Morgan! The party's over! You and Chalk-Eyes get over against the wall. You too, Rita. I don't trust you."

Morgan spun around, his hand claw-

ing at the front of his coat. The gun in Lennox' hand jumped, the bullet catching Morgan in the right shoulder. It didn't put him down, but the shock of it shook his big body. His face was dead-white as his hands came up, shoulder high.

Rita jumped toward Lennox, a little animal cry bursting from her lips. Nancy Hobbs came off the chair, fast, grabbed the girl by one arm and pulled her back out of the way. Frank Hobbs leaped up, holding his cuffed hands helplessly in front of himself.

The chalk-eyed man glared wordlessly at Lennox. Bill told Hobbs, "Get their guns, and be careful." The flyer obeyed. "Now tie them up," Bill ordered.

Hobbs swore, "These damned cuffs! I can't do a thing with them on."

Rita was fighting desperately in Nancy's grasp. Hobbs looked at her. "Honey, please?" She spat at him like a cornered cat.

Lennox said, "Snap it up! We don't have a minute. Someone'll hear that shot and come pounding up here."

As if in answer to his words feet hammered down the hall. Lennox stepped back as the door burst open and General Rodriguez bounced into the room.

The General saw Lennox' gun first. His lemon-yellow face turned a shade toward purple as he stopped; the high heels of his boots digging into the rough boards.

Lennox' voice was soft. "Good evening, General."

Rodriguez swore in Spanish. Lennox moved his gun and the General's mouth closed slowly. With his free hand, the studio trouble shooter went through Rodriguez' pockets. He found two guns and a wicked-looking knife and his tight lips twisted up at the corner as he tossed them across the room.

"Quite an arsenal. You should be able to win a war by yourself. Tie him up, Frank."

The flyer hadn't been paying any attention. He stood looking at Rita, his whole soul mirrored in his eyes.

Lennox swore sharply, "Come to life, will you?" To Nancy, he said, "Tie them all up. There's rope around those boxes. Then herd Frank out of here and lock the door. We have no time to waste."

Nancy got the ropes off the large boxes in one corner, tied up everyone except Frank as Bill held the gun on them all. Then Nancy guided Frank before her. Lennox followed, the big automatic still menacing the tied men and Rita. Lennox slammed the door, turned the key, then swung about and went down the hall. Nancy had Frank's arm, was half pulling him along. They went down a service stair and into the big kitchen.

The head waiter came through the swinging door just as they entered, saw them. His mouth opened, then Lennox showed him the gun.

"We're going out through the dining-room, mister, and you're going ahead of us. Don't forget, the gun's in my pocket and it goes off easy."

The man wasn't forgetting anything. His face was a dirty yellow. Without a word he turned and led the way, leaving the kitchen force open-mouthed, staring.

The waiter preceded them into the foyer. When they had almost reached the outer door, a voice said, "Lennox!"

Bill stole a glance across his shoulder and saw Arthur Farnero. Mike's nephew moved quickly toward them from the supper room.

"What's all this? Why, Frank!" as he saw Hobbs.

"No time to explain," Lennox snapped. "Come on. We're going to the Central Police Station."

"What happened?" Farnero asked as he followed Nancy, Bill and Hobbs into a cab.

Lennox told him in a dozen words. "They grabbed Nancy, broke Frank out of jail. I walked into the trap. I didn't figure Rita was in on the play."

Farnero said, "But what do they want?"

Lennox looked toward the silent Hobbs. "What do they want, Frank?"

Hobbs said, "Guns. Rodriguez' party is ready to strike—another revolution, but they're short on guns. Morgan's got a regular arsenal, been collecting all the gangsters' guns over the country ever since Repeal. He's got enough machine guns and ammunition to really start a war. I was supposed to fly them into Mexico when things broke. It would have taken at least two weeks. You can carry a lot of guns that way. Then I got this job in pictures. I figured it would be finished before the trouble started down below the border, but something came up three days ago."

"They have to move now, if they ever intend to. The General called me. I'd promised to come any time they needed me. Mike was at my apartment when the call came. He told me I was a damned fool to leave the job in pictures. He tried to talk me out of going, but I wouldn't listen. I'd promised Rita and her father—mostly Rita."

"They gave the guns to me almost two months ago and I stored them in an old house out by a little landing field beyond San Berdu. The whole point is that I'm the only one who knows where they are. I insisted that it be that way, otherwise I wouldn't play. I was afraid of leaks. I've been in Mexican revolutions before and I know how much chance there is for someone to double cross." Farnero said, "Is that Womley Field?"

Hobbs nodded. "Yeah. I was going to start on the first trip last night after the party. Rodriguez and Morgan came to see me about seven-thirty last night and I met them on the balcony. While we were talking, Mike came up and found us. They wanted him to join too. We all went down to his apartment. They started to argue and I got mad and left."

Farnero laughed suddenly. "Swell! That's what I wanted to know." A gun appeared in his hand. They all stared at it aghast. He rapped on the glass, motioned the driver to stop the cab.

The man obeyed and Farnero swung

out, slammed the door, then stood on the running-board and stuck his head in over the meter, so that his gun menaced the driver as well as those in the back seat. Lennox didn't dare shoot. Farnero could have gotten Nancy instantly.

"Go back to the club," Farnero said.

The cabbie showed him a scared face. "Y-yes, sir."

No one else said anything as the cab turned and went back toward the La Paloma.

Farnero, still on the running board, ordered the driver into the alley. They went in through a side door, up the narrow staircase.



RODRIGUEZ and Morgan were standing in the upper hallway. The man with the chalk eyes turned around and swore his pleasure as he saw

Lennox.

"By Gawd, sport, I'll kill you yet! I hadda yell five minutes before they broke the door in."

Morgan moved heavily toward them. "Good work, Art."

Farnero cursed softly. "It's a damned good thing that somebody around here keeps his head up. They were headed right for the cops when I stopped them. Another ten minutes and we never would have gotten those guns."

Rodriguez was sputtering with excitement. "We have no got them yet, and until Frank tells us—"

"He's told us already," Arthur Farnero cut in. "They're cached out in an old house by the Womley Airport. You know the place?" He was looking at Morgan.

The gang leader nodded. "I know where it is."

Farnero said, "All right. Get your trucks and get those guns down to the boat. We'll have to sail before midnight if we hope to make it down there in time."

Morgan wheeled and barked an order to the chalk-eyed man who raced away down the hall, stopped suddenly to look back at the prisoners. "What about them?"

Farnero shrugged. "Better bring them down and throw them on the boat. We can't take a chance on their talking. This play's been gummed up too much already."

Morgan nodded. "Yeah, that's an idea." He broke off as Rita came down the hall.

She paused at sight of Farnero, then ran forward to throw herself into his arms. "Arthur!"

He caught her closely. There was a gasping sound at Lennox' side and he turned to see Frank Hobbs' tight face. "Rita!" The name escaped from Hobbs' tight lips.

The girl's contempt for him was very real. "Stupid fool!" she spat toward him.

Farnero laughed harshly. "You are dumb, Hobbs."

The manacles at Hobbs' wrists rattled. "You double-crossing—" He leaped forward.

Farnero pushed the girl to one side, then a gun appeared in his hand. "Get back!" His voice was dangerously quiet.

Hobbs stopped. Lennox watched the boy's bitter expression change to hate.

Morgan said, "Cut the comedy. You're too quick on the trigger, Art. Half the trouble we've had today is because you blasted that screwy uncle of yours."

"Shut up!" Farnero swore at him.

Morgan said heavily, "Don't get too big for your skin, punk. I'm still running things. Besides, what's the difference? These mugs aren't going any place where they can ever talk."

The chalk-eyed man came back down the hall and Morgan said, "All set, Pete?"

Pete nodded. "Yeah. The truck's already rolling. It'll take us about four hours to get them guns down to Wilmington."

Morgan shrugged. "Well, it can't be

helped. You take a couple of the boys, get a car and ride these guys down to the boat. Lock them up in one of the cabins. We'll decide what to do with them when we get there."



PETE stirred restlessly. He sat on one of the cushioned lockers facing his prisoners, the heavy gun lying on his knees. Outside the winches rattled as the dirty tramp shipped the last of its cargo.

Nancy shivered in the wet, damp air. Lennox stirred and Pete yawned and looked at his watch. "Morgan oughta be showing up any minute." He inspected the captives almost impersonally.

Lennox said, "I don't think you're going to like it in Mexico, Pete."

"Why?"

"The climate isn't healthy and General Rodriguez might find it expedient to get rid of some of you, even if he wins. If he doesn't, there's always the adobe wall in the sunshine. The sun is always down there, Pete, even when the firing squad is working."

The man grunted, "Morgan will take care of me."

Lennox said, "If he can take care of himself. A lot of Americans have gone below the Line and monkeyed into things but most of them didn't last long."

"Morgan will—long enough."

Lennox' voice was curious. "Just where does Butcher come into the play?"

The chalk-eyed one hesitated. "I guess it ain't no harm telling you, seeing that you aren't going anywhere. Butcher gets the gambling concessions along the Border, Juarez, Mexicali, Tia Juana, Caliente."

Lennox stared, then he started to laugh. The man snapped, "What's so funny about that?"

Lennox told him, "Nothing. I was just thinking. Almost every muss they've had down there has been backed by some business interest or other, but

this is the first time I ever heard of a revolution backed by gamblers. Tell me, how many guns has Butcher got anyway?"

"Plenty. He's been buying up mobster guns all over the United States ever since Prohibition ended. Not only that, but he picked up all the others he could get his hands on. You think it's a gag, huh? Well, let me tell you, wise guy, it's no gag. Morgan's not only got the guns, but he's got the boys to handle them. We aren't turning those Tommys over to a lot of dumb spics. He's got some of the best smoke artists and muscle-men in the business. And don't think those guns aren't worth plenty, what with the guys in Washington shutting down on arms shipments and all."

Lennox nodded. "I get that, but what I don't get is why Morgan needed Frank so bad. There are other flyers and he's shipping down by boat now."

Pete laughed as Hobbs stirred. "Frank was a very important guy. He was a friend of some big rancher. The guy just died, but Frank knew all the peons on the ranch. The plan was for him to land the arms there. If anyone else had tried it, the peons would have talked."

Lennox looked inquiringly at Hobbs, who nodded. Bill said, "You really didn't expect it to work, Frank? You really didn't expect the government to stand by and let a bunch of gangsters take over Mexico?"

Hobbs shrugged. "I know it sounds crazy, but Rita's father is well liked in most of Mexico. There'll be plenty of natives in his army. All they lacked was guns."

The chalk-eyed man snickered. "And did that dame play you for a sucker, mister, getting you to agree to fly those guns across. And all the time she was playing around with Art Farnero."

Hobbs half rose. "You're crazy!"

Pete said, flatly, "Sit down." He had the big gun in his hand. He seemed to take delight in torturing Hobbs. "Crazy, am I? That shows how much you know.

Why, she and Farnero slipped across to Yuma and got married three days ago."

Hobbs' face was dead white. "I don't believe it."

Pete was jeering at him. "Of course you don't. You're a sap—that's what they counted on. Mike Farnero threatened last night, that unless Morgan and Rodriguez left you alone, he'd tell you about her. Art Farnero and I were on the balcony, and heard. Art came bustin' into the room and his uncle called him a dirty, double-crossing—and told him he'd cut him out of his will. Art snatched up the gun and let Mike have it."

Hobbs wet his lips. "You're lying! Art wasn't in L.A. last night. He was in San Diego."

Pete laughed loudly. "He flew up, you fool, flew up to see that black-haired slut."

With a wordless cry Hobbs leaped toward the man. Pete's gun spoke once, the slug tearing through the flyer's stomach. But it failed to stop Hobbs completely. He was on top of the chalk-eyed man, his manacled hands rising and falling, battering against the top of Pete's head.

"Call her a slut!" His words had an insane sound, as if he did not know what he was saying. The gun had slipped from Pete's fingers to the floor of the cabin.

Lennox dived for it, straightened. He reached over to pull Frank back, but there was no need. The hands rose half way, dropped slowly and the flyer pitched forward onto the cushion beside the unconscious gunman.

Nancy jumped toward him. "Frank! Frank!"

Hobbs did not answer and Lennox guessed that he would never answer again. Bill turned and raced up the companionway to the deck. At the entrance he met the captain and two of the crew.

The captain was short, heavy, in pea-jacket and cap. "What the hell?"

Lennox slammed the gun against the side of the captain's head, let the body slump to the deck, turned, menacing the

crew members. They stared at him. The gun in his hand held them rigid. He bucked them toward the forecastle.

Two more came running forward, stopped when they saw his gun. None of them had arms. He looked them in the forecastle, barred the door, then mounted to the bridge.

The spotlight caught his attention. He turned it on, pointed it directly upward toward the starlit sky. With luck, some of the harbor police would see the light, come out to investigate. The sound of a boat made him swing and run toward the landing stage. He had almost reached it when Morgan's head came over the rail.

"Turn off that damned light!" The gang leader's voice was hoarse. "What the hell are you trying to do, Cap, get all the cops in the world on our necks?" He swung to the deck. Other figures followed him—Rodriguez, Farnero and Rita.

Lennox crept forward in the shadows. His voice was tight. "You're all through, Morgan. Get your hands in the air!"

Butcher Morgan cursed savagely. "Lennox!" Flame lanced out from his side. A bullet struck the superstructure close to Bill's head and whined down the deck as it ricocheted.

The gun in Lennox's hand belched twice. There was a cry from Morgan, a short, sharp sound as he staggered backward. The ship's rail struck him just above the knee. He hesitated for an instant, then his body plunged over. There was a splash, lost in the pound of gunfire as both Rodriguez and Farnero drove shots into the darkness. Lennox dropped flat on the deck as the bullets pinged against the steel plates. A slug screamed down at an angle past his head and tore through the fleshy part of his leg.

He steadied himself, gritting his teeth against the pain and fired in return. There was a grunt and the General slipped to the deck. Lennox squeezed his trigger again, heard the pin strike on an empty cylinder. He reared up—

right as Farnero, seeming to sense that Lennox's gun was empty, jumped forward.

Lennox heaved the useless automatic directly into the face of the charging man, then jumped. But his wounded leg hampered him. His fingertips barely grazed Farnero as he went down. He fell heavily to the deck, lay for an instant not moving. He could see Farnero above him in the uncertain light, saw the man's lips twist wolfishly.

"You've been asking for this, Lennox." The automatic steadied.

Nancy Hobbs said from the right, "Drop that gun, Art!"

With an oath, Farnero pivoted, snapping a shot toward the direction of her voice. Lennox heaved himself forward, his arms locked about Farnero's knees, dropped the man to the deck with a clean tackle.

Farnero twisted, trying to bring his gun up against Bill's side. Lennox rolled over, caught the man's wrist with his right hand, fighting desperately for possession of the gun. Someone was standing over him, battering the back of Bill's head with a leather purse. It was Rita, swearing at him in Spanish. The swinging purse stopped suddenly. Lennox heard Nancy's voice, realized that Nancy had dragged Rita back. Then all his attention was centered on the gun, and the man beneath him.

They struggled without sound. Lennox's lungs seemed to be bursting, then suddenly Farnero weakened. The gun came around quickly, exploded. There was a convulsive jerk in Farnero's body, then he was still.

Lennox rose slowly, a little dazed. As he came to his feet he saw Rita break free from Nancy, swing her purse at the fan writer's head, turn and dash toward the rail, but she never reached it.

The harbor police were coming over the side; a flashlight cut through the gloom. With a choking cry Rita spun and raced toward the bow of the ship.

A gun spoke from the darkness at the

rail. She threw up her hands and fell forward onto her face.

The harbor police were around Nancy and Lennox. One of them walked forward and turned his lamp on Rita. Bill heard him swear, saw him wipe his forehead with the back of his hand. "Jeeze! A woman! And I shot her!"

Everything was confusion; everyone was asking questions. The lieutenant in charge said, "But what were they—smugglers? What were they hauling on the boat?"

Lennox said, "They were revolutionists. They were hauling an arsenal." He limped over to the open hatch and pointed down.

The lieutenant stared at the stacked cases. "Where in hell did all those guns come from?"

Lennox said, "Mobster guns—prob-

ably the largest collection of gang weapons ever made in United States. Morgan's been gathering them for a long time." He turned and went back to Nancy.

The girl was standing quietly at the head of the companionway. He told her, a little hoarsely, "I'm sorry about Frank."

She didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say.

The police helped them down the ladder into the boat. Lennox looked back at the dark ship. A lot of plans had gone haywire that night. There wouldn't be a revolution below the Line. And suddenly he remembered the picture.

He'd have to call Spurck—tell him that Frank Hobbs was dead. He knew of a lot easier jobs than that, but it had to be done.

FOR DECEMBER

Exciting, powerful, cleverly told detective stories—these make up the contents of the December BLACK MASK.

Among them is **DWIGHT V. BABCOCK'S** gripping novelette of the California coast. **BEEK**, that ex-newspaperman gone trailer conscious, goes hunting for abalone shells early one morning. So does the murdered man and the fellow who loves his wife. An intriguing setup! An interesting story!

ROGER TORREY has written a new **Marge and McCarthy** yarn, "Concealed Weapon." A guy is on his way to see McCarthy when he meets his own murderer. But the killer muffs the job and the victim falls wounded at McCarthy's feet. You couldn't call him a McCarthy client, but anyway McCarthy takes the case. What he does with it you'll find out when you read "Concealed Weapon."

One of those unusual and arresting short stories by **DONALD WANDREI** is on the list. There are also plenty more fine yarns all set to make an illustrious issue of the

DECEMBER BLACK MASK

CURTAIN CALL

Suicide or murder? This cop plays out his strange hunch mercilessly

THE trouble with you," I said, glaring at Jojo Evans, "you think everything connected with the detecting business is funny. You're like a lot of guys that write these dumb detective stories. Murder is just something to crack wise about."

I felt that way. It could have been the rain, and most likely part of it was but,

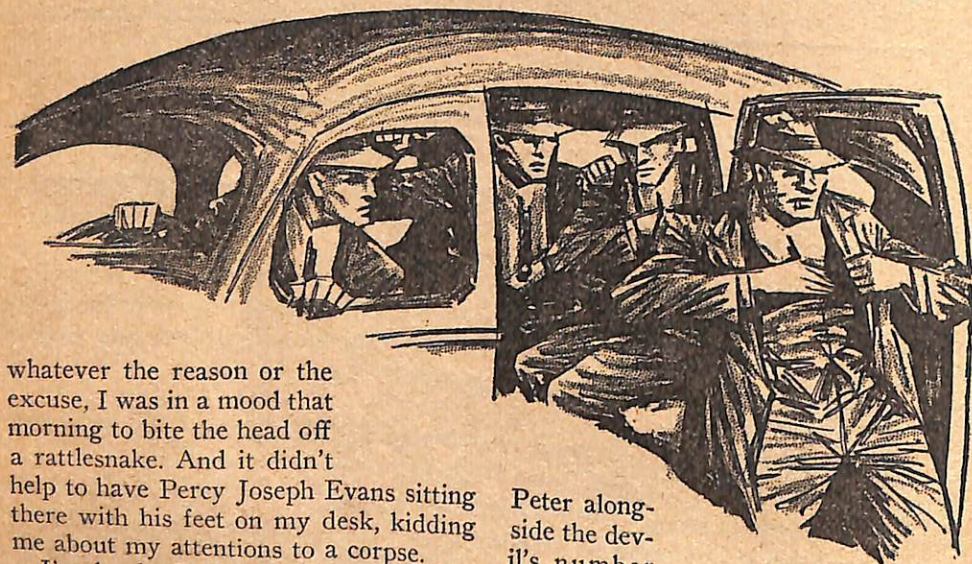
W. J. Reynolds, my boss, and said morbidly: "You sent for me, Chief?" He scowled at me.

"Close the door, Thompson."

"Sure." I closed it.

"Sit down."

"Sure." I sat. Two other men were sitting, too, and both gave me a good looking-at. One was Detective Inspector Bill Donahue; the other was Mr. Nick Lomac. Putting those two together in the same room was like parking St.



whatever the reason or the excuse, I was in a mood that morning to bite the head off a rattlesnake. And it didn't help to have Percy Joseph Evans sitting there with his feet on my desk, kidding me about my attentions to a corpse.

I'm dumb. I admit it. Any other dick on the force would have taken one look at that corpse and scribbled "suicide" down in his hip-pocket notebook; but yours truly, Thompson the Trouble Seeker, had to stand right up in public and call it murder.

Why? Because it should have been murder. This guy Vanetti had been begging for it.

Only it wasn't. Or was it?

I walked into the private sanctum of

Peter alongside the devil's number one furnace stoker. Bill Donahue was big, gray at the temples, middle-aged and honest. Nick Lomac was small, slim, black-haired and vicious. A politician.

The Chief narrowed his gray eyes at me and pulled a scowl across his mouth. He was a good man, Reynolds. He'd been around a long time and without him Kolb City would have been a heap crookeder than it was.

He said, "The papers have printed a statement by you, Thompson, about the

By HUGH B. CAVE

death of Leon Vanetti. An unauthorized statement and a most embarrassing one. Perhaps you can explain."

"You know these newspaper reporters as well as I do," I muttered.

"Meaning?"

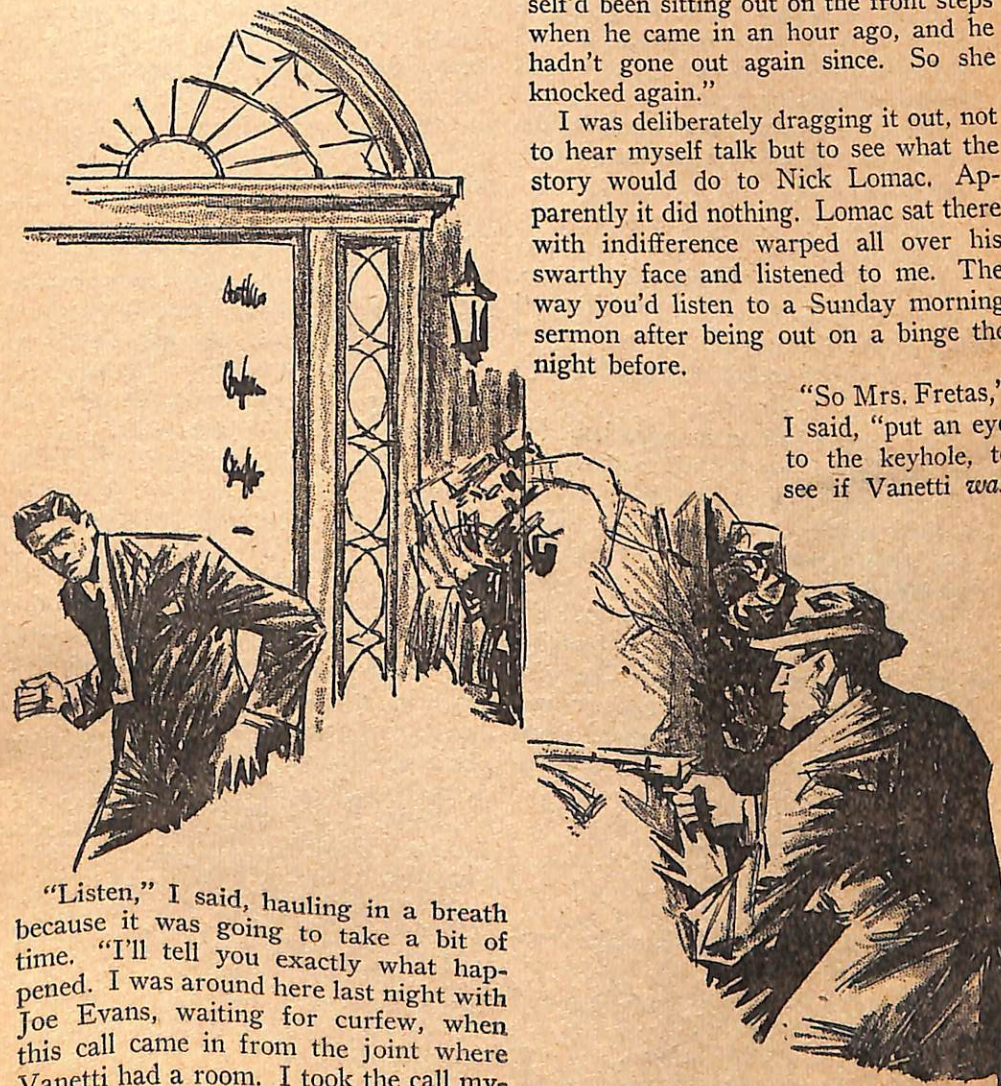
"I spoke out of turn and some squirt scribbled it down."

"Then you don't actually believe Vanetti was murdered?"

"She was in a lather about something, but she talks with a spaghetti accent and it took me at least five minutes to unravel the spaghetti. What she was trying to tell me was this: Some woman telephoned and wanted to speak with Vanetti. So Mrs. Fretas, the landlady, hoofed upstairs to Vanetti's room and knocked, and got no answer. She figured he must be asleep, because she herself'd been sitting out on the front steps when he came in an hour ago, and he hadn't gone out again since. So she knocked again."

I was deliberately dragging it out, not to hear myself talk but to see what the story would do to Nick Lomac. Apparently it did nothing. Lomac sat there with indifference warped all over his swarthy face and listened to me. The way you'd listen to a Sunday morning sermon after being out on a binge the night before.

"So Mrs. Fretas," I said, "put an eye to the keyhole, to see if Vanetti was



"Listen," I said, hauling in a breath because it was going to take a bit of time. "I'll tell you exactly what happened. I was around here last night with Joe Evans, waiting for curfew, when this call came in from the joint where Vanetti had a room. I took the call myself. It was Vanetti's landlady.

in, and she saw him hanging there."

"You and Evans went over there?" the Chief said.

He knew we'd gone over there. He was just pulling it out of me for the benefit of Nick Lomac. It didn't take a swami to size this thing up. Nick Lomac was sore because of my murder talk, and he wanted a complete, detailed explanation, and he was influential enough to get it.

"When we got there," I said, "we had to bust in the door. Mrs. Fretas didn't have an extra key because, so she says, she gave her spare to Vanetti, a couple of days ago. He lost his and asked for another. So we broke in and found him hanging there."

Nick Lomac opened his mouth for the first time. "What was he hung with, Thompson?"

"Fishline."

"Fishline?"

"Yeh. The kind you catch cod on. Heavy stuff, tarred. It seems Vanetti did a lot of fishing in his spare time and had a couple of tackle boxes under his bed."

Nick Lomac had an imagination. He put his fingers up to his throat and rubbed them around the edge of his starched collar, and winced. I didn't blame him. That line had almost sawed Vanetti's head off.

"So you and Evans walked in," the Chief said, "and found him hanging there. The door was locked. The windows were locked. On the floor you found the chair on which Vanetti stood while adjusting the noose. That's right, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"You cut him down?"

"We cut him down."

"Then what?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just police routine."

"But when the reporters arrived, you told them it was murder."

"That's not so," I insisted. "I just warned them to leave things alone because it *might* be murder."

"But, damn it, Thompson, they quoted you as saying it *was* murder!"

"That was their mistake."

The Chief glared at me, then let me have it. He possessed a nice vocabulary, most of which he picked up while handling mules in the War. Ordinarily I'd have grinned at him, but with Nick Lomac there I didn't. Because the lacing I was getting was solely for Lomac's benefit, and I knew it.

When it was over I muttered under my breath and got up and walked out, pretending to be sore.

Jojo Evans still had his dogs on my desk. He grinned at me. "Way out here," he said, "I heard the biggest part of it. There's one word he uses that really gets me. That 'scurriolousness.' Some day I'm gonna look that up. What's it mean?"



IPPO'S lunch cart has the best coffee you ever tasted, and he deals it to you by way of his black-eyed daughter Anna, who stands five-three and has a smile that wide.

I slugged the coffee and thought things over. This wasn't an ordinary case of detecting. There are standard jobs and there are crazy quilts. In the former you smell along a given trail, knowing more or less what ought to be at the end of it. You just keep on smelling until you uncover the source of the stench. But in this particular job there were too many possible angles. Smells emanated from it the way tentacles curl out from an octopus.

First-off, the world was never going to miss Vanetti. The air would be cleaner with him underground. And I could name at least ten persons to whom his demise would bring a great big belly laugh. So, without any deep thinking at all, you could practically fill a phone book with the names of suspects.

And then again, maybe Vanetti'd really hung himself.

I drank a second mug of coffee, just

to see Anna Pippo smile at me. Jojo Evans slid onto the stool beside me.

"There's going to be hell to pay," he said.

I glared. "Why?"

"Nick Lomac didn't ask to have you fired. I eavesdropped."

"Why should he ask to have me fired?"

"He's sore."

I said, "That guy is always sore. He just hops from one sore spell to another. Last week he burned up because a right guy got elected to fill that vacancy on the school committee. The week before that he had pups because Mitchell Brothers got the contract for that high school."

"Only this time," Evans said, "he didn't blow up. He didn't shoot off his mouth." He gave me a fishy stare. "I'm only the police photog man but I know this time, Thompson, that it goes a lot deeper. The Lomac guy actually told the Chief to lay off you. Said you only did what you thought was your duty."

"Real nice of him," I snapped.

Evans reached across me for the sugar. "You keep out of dark alleys, cop. You watch your step."

I didn't think much about it. There was too much else on my mind. "You get those pictures finished yet?" I asked.

He shook his head. I dropped my check into his coffee and walked out and drove up to Ancell Street, to the rooming house where Mr. Leon Vanetti had committed suicide—perhaps.

It was a crummy dive, as you'd expect in a neighborhood like that. The name of Ancell Street got to be so bad at one time that respectable residents at the cleaner end of it petitioned the city fathers to change its label. Mrs. Fretas' rooming house offered its high class tenants a nice respectable view of a dump on one side and an abandoned brewery on the other.

The downstairs door was open and I walked in. The door of the landlady's apartment was open, too. Mr. Fretas was parked in a rocking chair in his

shirt-sleeves, reading a paper, and the missus was jammed into another chair, the whole two hundred and fifty pounds of her, peeling spuds.

I told her I was going upstairs to have another look around.

"Sure," she said. Her old man didn't even look up.

Vanetti's room was second floor front, and when I got into it I just stood there looking around, wondering why I'd come. It wasn't anything I could put a finger on, but that room fascinated me, just the way certain scenes in a movie do things to you. As a room it was worth just about what Vanetti'd paid for it—four bucks a week. The bed was up against one wall, a seedy green carpet covered the floor, and the furniture was heavy old-fashioned stuff salvaged from a junk store somewhere.

I felt dumb, gaping there. Something in that room was getting me down. I walked around it slowly, poking at the bed, the bureau. I hefted the chair which Jojo and I'd found overturned on the floor. I decided what the hell, maybe I was crazy. But still I couldn't shake that feeling.

I hiked downstairs again, and Mrs. Fretas was still peeling potatoes. I sat down, envying her old man because he looked so all-fired comfortable. A spud dropped with a noisy plop into Mrs. Fretas' bucket of water and I asked:

"Did Vanetti have many phone calls?"

She blinked her eyes at me. She had a face like an inflated basketball and her eyes were like imperfections in the leather. "Phone calls?" she echoed. "Why, no, I don't think so, officer."

"Who was the girl called him last night? Know?"

She shook her head, very solemn. "No, I don't think so."

"Did she ever call before?"

"No. No girl ever call him before, which I know of."

"And she didn't give her name, hey?"

"She just say, 'Please, I wish to speak with Mr. Vanetti. You call him to the phone, please.'"

I was wasting time. Still, that phone call could have been important. I wondered if by any streak of long-shot luck I'd be able to trace it.

There was another angle, though, which might prove to be more valuable at the moment. I lit a cigarette, watched the skin curl off a potato for a moment, then said: "You have keys to most of your rooms, don't you, Mrs. Fretas?"

She said, "Yes," and labored around to point to a row of hooks on the wall. Each hook held a couple of keys and the keys were tagged.

"Did Vanetti lose his keys very often?"

"Oh, no. Just once."

"You remember exactly when that was?"

I didn't think she would, but after scowling at a potato for a couple of minutes, she surprised me. "Today," she said, "is Thursday. Now let me see. Mr. Vanetti, he kill himself yesterday, which is Wednesday. The day before that I go to the movies with Mrs. Molinoff. That is Tuesday. So it is Monday Mr. Vanetti lose his key."

"Monday, hey?"

"Monday. I am sitting here reading the noosepaper. My husband, he is go out for some beer. It is maybe ten o'clock when Mr. Vanetti comes in. He goes straight up the stairs. Then he comes down again and he says, 'Mrs. Fretas, I lose my key I am afraid. You give me another, please, and tomorrow I get a new one made for myself and give your key back to you.' So I give him my key and he goes upstairs again."

"Ten o'clock Monday night, eh?" I said. "I don't suppose you'd have any idea where he went that night."

She shook her head. "No-o. He go to the doctor that afternoon, I remember, because his leg trouble him. But where he go at night. . . ." She shrugged her shoulders.

I almost had it then. The reason for my queer ideas about that upstairs room, I mean. The doctor. Vanetti'd been to a doctor because his leg troubled him.

A couple of years ago Vanetti'd been banged up in an automobile accident which had left him with a limp.

I almost had it. It came up to me like a wave on a beach, whispering closer, closer, and then suddenly receding without having washed out the cobwebs in my brain. Like a name you almost but can't quite remember. Like a strain of music, or a voice on the telephone. Close, but not quite.

I closed my eyes and conjured up a mental picture of Vanetti as I remembered him: Small, thin, ratty in face and figure, dipping along like a two-wheeled cart with one wheel off center. I made fists of my hands and tried to force my brain to think through that last thin layer of mist. But it was no go.

I sat there, struggling, then gave it up. You can put yourself in a chuckle college that way. I stood up and said good night to Mrs. Fretas and her old man, and walked out of there, my face so full of scowl that it ached.



I WAS all over town, of course, that Vanetti'd committed suicide, and that didn't help me a bit. When I asked my questions, I got a flock of negative head-shakes for replies, and I put those questions to citizens who couldn't possibly have been so void of information. I asked bartenders in joints where Vanetti had hung out. I asked men who had palled around with him. They just didn't want to remember. Had any of those mugs seen Vanetti Monday night? Hell, no!

I made a nuisance of myself for two days. I covered the town like an epidemic, visiting every possible place the guy could have been to. But he hadn't been anywhere. So far as Monday night was concerned, Vanetti could have hung himself Monday morning.

I had a talk with Bill Donahue, who'd sat in on my little conference with Nick Lomac and my Chief. Bill didn't get

around much lately. A seige of the flu had taken plenty out of him, and the doctors had warned him to ease up. But he still had the best brain in the department. Put that guy flat on his back, lop off his arms and legs, and with his brain alone he could solve more cases than most of the healthy lads who do their thinking on the hoof. Including me.

He heard me out and then spent a long time looking at me, with a solemn frown on his rugged face. Finally he said, "Why don't you drop this business, Thompson? After all, Vanetti was just a heel. No one misses him."

"And besides," I said, "I have no proof he was murdered. I can't even convince myself."

"Huh?"

"You're telling me," I said, "what Joe Evans told me. Keep out of dark alleys. Pull in my horns before someone breaks them off and rams them down my throat. Oke, Bill. You want me to go on living, and I like you for it. On the other hand I'm single—no wife, no kids—and I'm an insatiable glutton for punishment. And this thing has me goofy."

He did his best to dissuade me, and he failed. I'm a sap. I'm a dope. I'm always going into barrooms and gulping down some screwy concoction the bar-keep claims will knock your hat off.

So Bill said, "Well, if you must find out where Vanetti was Monday night, try number 10 Casavant Street. And be careful."

I thanked him. On my way out I bumped into Jojo Evans. "Listen, you," I snorted. "When do we get a look at those pictures of the room and body?" "I'm gonna do them up tonight," he informed me.

I told him he'd better. Then I drove out to Casavant Street.

You wouldn't expect to run into a mugg like Vanetti at Number Ten Casavant. We have a Social Register in our town, and a lot of those lads with too much money and nothing to do like to play around; and Number Ten Casavant is where they do it.

What I mean, you have to be properly dressed, properly named and quite properly heeled; otherwise your ambitions are deflated at the front door and you are reminded that for ordinary bums like you there are beer joints, bowling alleys and backroom crap games.

The police shut both eyes when looking in that direction. It would have been voluntary suicide for any mere cop to get tough with that glittering collection of money-changers.

I spoke to Paul, the gate-keeper. I said, "How's everything tonight, Paul?" and he said, "Oh, so-so. Quiet." I'd been there before. Venny Hamlin was always very nice to cops, provided the cops were nice to Venny.

"Mr. Hamlin around, Paul?" I asked. Paul nodded.

I strolled in, and at that hour the place was a morgue. A couple of blue book laddies were sipping cocktails at the fancy bar, and off in a corner four well dressed men were silently playing with a deck of cards, and that was all. I hiked along a soft red carpet, went down the hall to Venny Hamlin's office and knocked.

Venny was a bit surprised when I entered. He arched his eyebrows and said, "Well! My friend, Detective Thompson!" He pushed a box of cigars toward me, leaned back in his chair and frowned. "Sight-seeing or what?"

"Sleuthing," I said.

"Here?"

"I'm as surprised as you are. The tip almost floored me."

He hung onto his scowl. It didn't mean anything. Venny Hamlin was really a good egg when you got to know him. No gangster background, no gutter upbringing. Out of college four years ago, he'd chauffeured for some old gal with a heap of bank books. This Number Ten Casavant Street was a natural outgrowth of a dawning realization that the money-money people didn't mind losing a few dollars if they could be entertained while parting with them.

I said, "Strictly off the record, Venny,

I'm checking the activities of one Leon Vanetti. He was here Monday night."

"Leon Vanetti? That the Vanetti who hung himself?"

I nodded.

"I don't think I know him."

"You might not, by name," I told him.

"But he was here Monday night. Bill Donahue says he was here, and Bill's never wrong."

Venny shrugged.

"Listen," I said, and described Vanetti. Described the face, the form, the limp. The limp did it.

"Right," Venny admitted. "He was here."

"Who brought him?"

"Why?"

"Just curious."

He hesitated, looking very thoughtful. "Thompson," he said finally, "you don't want to know the answer to that."

"Why don't I?" I snapped.

"Look. This Vanetti is gone, forgotten. From what I've read in the papers, he won't be missed any more than a case of smallpox. You, Thompson, you're a good guy, a smart dick. You've got a future. You take my advice and drop this. There's nothing in it for you except trouble some night in a dark alley."

It was funny, and I don't mean humorous. Joe Evans had handed me that same line; now I was getting it from the sachem of a gambling casino. Lay off.

I didn't press him for more. I knew one thing, anyway, and it was big enough to chew on for a while. I said, "Well, thanks, pal," and walked out.

Business, I noticed, was picking up. There were three more cars outside now than when I'd entered.

I piled into my own jalopy and drove back to town, slowly, thinking about Leon Vanetti and his limp, and that room at Mrs. Fretas' place. I had a lot to think about, and I must have driven three miles before I waked up to the fact that someone in a machine behind was more than a little interested in me.

I slowed to a nice smooth twenty on a four-lane highway. By rights the fellow should have whizzed past. He didn't. I reached up, tipped the rear-view mirror to a better angle and hoofed the jalopy up to forty. He came right along.

One of Venny Hamlin's men? I didn't think so. True, Venny had gently tried to nudge me off this job, and perhaps he had other reasons than an interest in the future state of my health, but this particular bit of play was crude. Venny Hamlin was never crude.

I did my level best for a mile to make that lad go by me, so I could get a look at his face, but it didn't work. When I slowed, he slowed. When I stopped—just once, as an experiment—the louse pulled off into one of those shady glens built by WPA to accommodate neckers and picnic hounds.

Disgusted, I said to hell with him and gave my jalopy the gun. He wasn't behind me when I turned into Mitchell Street, where I live.

And yet, I wasn't alone.

I'm a quiet guy with few bad habits, and I selected that Mitchell Street apartment house three years ago because in more ways than one it's soothing to jaded nerves. You don't hear street cars. You don't have kids yawping on the sidewalks before breakfast. I'm harmless, I like to be left alone; and now, damn it, I was being watched. Not only followed, but waited for.

Because when I parked my crate at the curb and got out of it, a lad across the street ducked quickly for the shelter of a doorway. And on Mitchell Street people don't move that fast unless they have guilty consciences.

I stood there and stared holes in the doorway, my mind half made up to go over there and yank him out and demand of him how-come. Nothing makes me sorer than to be spied on. But I let it go, knowing the guy would most likely have vanished by the time I crossed over. And besides, from the window of my front room upstairs, I'd probably get a better look at him.

I walked up and let myself in, and my phone was ringing. I scooped it up. "Thompson speaking."

It was Jojo Evans. He was excited. "Listen," he said. "You remember those pictures I took?" And before I could reply, to tell him I not only remembered them but was wornout with waiting for them, he rushed on: "I developed 'em tonight, Tommy, and they're hot. They're dynamite! You get over here quick!"

"Right over," I said, and hung up.

I went right out. The guy across the street could wait, I told myself, until I saw those pictures. If he wanted a look at me hard enough, he'd be there again, some other time. I breezed downstairs and pushed my jalopy across town with my heart pounding and fire in my nostrils.

Those pictures taken of Vanetti's body and the room in which he died were going to tell me something. They were going to explain the queer feeling I had. Otherwise I was going to be the sorest Homicide dick this side of the place where detectives go when they decompose.



VANS lived in a swank little apartment house overlooking the park lake. I scraped a fender getting the car parked, and near pulverized a lady with a poodle when I barged into the place. My thumb went to the bell and stayed there. I'd been twenty minutes getting over from Mitchell Street, I figured, and that was nineteen minutes too long when you smelled the end of a trail.

No answer.

"Damn it," I stormed, "that's like him, to go out for a beer at a time like this!"

I stepped out, looked for his car. It was down the line a short way, snugly parked. He couldn't have gone far on foot, I told myself, so I sat on the white steps in the lobby and waited for him.

Five minutes, ten, fifteen. Twice I rang the bell again. And he didn't come.

I buzzed the janitor. I snapped, "Detective Thompson, Police Department!" at him, and in a couple of minutes he came wobbling up from his basement suite, fat and anxious and out of breath.

He let me into Jojo's apartment, and the place was empty.

I looked around. I barged from bedroom to living-room and back again; into the kitchenette, the bathroom. There was a faint smell of chemicals around the joint, and in the bathroom on a shelf were some wet white enamel trays. But no Jojo, no pictures.

I glared at the janitor. "I suppose you've been down cellar. You wouldn't know if Mr. Evans had any visitors in the past half-hour."

He wagged his head. "I wouldn't know."

It looked bad. After calling me, he wouldn't have gone out alone on the trail of any clue furnished by those pictures. He'd have waited. Unless, maybe, he'd rushed over to Headquarters.

I phoned headquarters. They hadn't seen him. I was worried as hell.

I was a lot more worried when I got through shuffling around and began to think the thing out. You look. Jojo'd phoned me to hustle over and see those pictures. Hot pictures. He'd been expecting me. Those pictures were going to prove that I was right about Vanetti's suicide being no suicide.

Vanetti'd been murdered. His murderers were wise to the fact that I was smelling along and getting warmer. They'd had me watched. More than likely they'd had Joe Evans watched, too, because the photographer was with me when we first laid eyes on the corpse.

Suppose that telephone conversation was overheard? Suppose the wire was tapped?

I was at Headquarters before I got things straightened out to my own satisfaction, and by that time I had the jitters. It wouldn't have been so bad if I'd found the pictures; but their absence

meant that whoever walked Jojo out of that apartment had confiscated the pictures also. That was bad. Those pictures were hot. They'd burn 'em. And unless we worked fast, lightning fast, they'd take steps to put Jojo out of the way, too.

I boiled into Headquarters and spilled it, the whole of it, because this was no time to play lone wolf. I threw it at the Chief in one big chunk and he turned pale. Then I demanded Bill Donahue, because if ever we needed a man with brains, with uncanny ability to see through fog, this was it. But the Detective Inspector wasn't there. He wouldn't be, the Chief informed me.

"They took him to the hospital this afternoon, on a stretcher. His heart again."

I could have cried. It wasn't fair to put a mastermind like Donahue in hospital when the life of a swell guy might depend on him. "You send someone over there!" I croaked. "Send someone to tell him what's happened!"

Then I barged out.

I didn't use my own jalopy. It was too slow. I used a police car that would do eighty, and I was out at Number Ten Casavant before the engine warmed. There were two ways, I figured, to get Jojo Evans back. One was to comb the city, dig into every possible hide-out in search of him. It wouldn't work in time. He'd be dead before we found him.

The other way was to smash the Vanetti business wide open and put a finger on the man or men responsible. They were the ones who had Joe Evans.

It began to rain when I drove into the driveway of Number Ten. I didn't park the car. The yard was crowded and there was no room. I bailed out, ducked up the steps, and when Paul tried to block me off, not recognizing me, I shouldered him aside and barked, "Hamlin."

Venny Hamlin was talking to a nice genteel group of blue-bloods near one of the gaming tables. I just shoved in and grabbed his arm.

"See you alone!" I snapped. "Important."

He was smart. He took one look at the sweat on my face, the fire in my eyes, and knew better than to cross me. He didn't even excuse himself, just nodded, jerked around and strode down the hall to his private office. I yanked the door shut behind me.

"All right," I rapped out. "Who was he with?"

"What the hell's eating you, Thompson?"

"Time's precious! Who was Vanetti with when he came here Monday night?"

He took a deep breath, then shook his head. "I can't tell you."

I damn near lost my temper. My arms went up in the air, waving, and I yelled: "Get me, Hamlin, this isn't a game any more! It's life or death! *Who was he with?*"

Hamlin's right hand was in his pocket and he said softly: "I think you'd better go away and cool off, feller." That iced me.

I was cooler at that moment than I'd been since leaving Joe Evan's apartment. I looked at Hamlin's pocket and said, "Listen. Get this straight. I came here to find out who Vanetti was with and I'm not leaving till I know. The guy was a big shot; otherwise you wouldn't be so reluctant to spill his name. Big shot or not, you talk or I'll tear the joint apart. And you with it!"

I walked straight toward him. It sounds dumb, maybe, but it wasn't. He had nothing to gain by blasting me, except maybe a kind word from the big shot whose name, as a mere matter of ethics, he was holding back. Nothing to gain and the world to lose, because if he shot down a cop it would be the end of him.

He didn't shoot. He showed me both his hands, heaved a sigh and said, "You win, Thompson. It was Dane Moeller."

"Thanks," I said. Dane Moeller was the right-hand man of Mr. Nick Lomac, and his name on Venny's lips bore out

what I had known from the beginning: that Venny would not be protecting small fry, but someone high up in the political or financial parade.

I said, "Why'd you hold back?"

He shrugged. "Moeller is one of my best customers."

"And Nick Lomac, too?"

He nodded. "Lomac, too."

I said gently: "O. K., Venny, I'll play ball. My mouth stays shut provided you keep away from telephones for a while. Whatever happens, no one knows you opened your trap."

I hiked out. The Thompson brain was beginning to click on all cylinders by then, and I had a pretty fair idea of what lay ahead. If I made mistakes, it would be lights out. Even if I didn't make mistakes it would probably be fatal to my career as a detective, but anyhow, I knew what had to be done.

I drove back to town and headed for the palatial residence of Mr. Nick Lomac, without wasting any time at all.



L OMAC had a big joint on the boulevard, something like a transplanted Spanish castle. You and I, if we pooled every cent we could get our hands on, wouldn't be able to buy a foot of land in that district, because our names aren't in the Blue Book. Mine isn't, anyway. But little things like that never bothered Nick Lomac. He bought himself an acre and built himself a house. The citizens paid for most of it, thinking they were buying bricks for a new airport. And the citizens paid for most of the upkeep. Nick Lomac knew all the angles.

I rang, and a servant opened the door to me. I asked if Mr. Lomac was in, and told who I was.

When I paced into the parlor, Nick Lomac stared at me without smiling, put down the highball he was sipping, and said: "Sit down, Thompson." The servant vanished.

I didn't sit. I hadn't come to do any sitting.

"Where is he, Lomac?" I said.

He blew smoke from his nostrils. Despite his lack of size, you'd never make the mistake of underestimating Nick Lomac. You'd never made it twice, anyway. He was little, but so was Napoleon, so's your wife, probably.

"What's the trouble, Thompson?" he said softly.

I would have enjoyed fooling around with him, but there was no time for it. A glance told me we were alone in the room, and that was enough. I said, "Where's Joe Evans?"

"Who?"

I snapped, "You want to hear me talk?"

"Well," he said, shrugging, "I certainly would like to have an explanation of some sort, Thompson."

"All right, you'll get it. But, first, let me tell you something. If Joe Evans dies, Lomac, you burn for it. So it might be a good idea if you went to a phone right now and told your gorillas to lay off. If I were you I wouldn't take any chances."

I watched him when I said that, but might as well have been watching the outside of an egg. His face didn't change. His eyes didn't blink. "I don't know what you're getting at," he said.

I threw my guesses at him. "Vanetti was murdered. Moeller, your right-hand worm, stole the key to his room Monday night; then later you sent some boys up to get rid of Vanetti and fake the suicide. Joe Evans and I were wise when we saw the set-up. You had us watched. When Evans phoned me about those photographs he'd taken, those hot pictures, you snatched him. Where is he?"

It didn't even jar him. He smiled that oily smile of his and said, "You've been seeing too many movies, Thompson."

I said, "I hope you've seen a few. Then you'll know what this is."

I showed him my gun. Muzzle first. He took a quick backward step. A lot

of tough lads get the jitters when you aim guns at them.

"Where is he, Lomac?" I said.

"Thompson, you're crazy."

"Where is he?"

He dragged in a deep breath. The kind you need when you get a hollow feeling in your mid-section. "Well," he said, "it so happens I do know where Evans is. But I didn't have a thing to do with him being there."

"Where is he?"

"Over on Dexter Street. The Dexter Social Club. You go over there and you'll find him."

"And you're not responsible," I said sarcastically, "for his being there."

"No."

"Of course not," I agreed. "Oke, Lomac, you're coming with me."

"Me?"

"If you think I'd let you out of my sight, you're crazy."

He threw out a sigh and shrugged his shoulders. "I'll order the car," he said.

I let him pick up the phone. What the hell, I had a gun on his back, and wouldn't he be the world's biggest fool if he tried any stunts? Besides, I couldn't use my own car unless I forced him to drive it. You can't drive and hold a gun on a man at the same time.

He said into the phone: "Tell Andy to bring the car around front right away." Then he forked the phone and looked at me and said nothing.

I should have been tipped off right then. If he'd been really scared, he would have done a lot of talking. About how he wasn't responsible for what had happened, and so forth. But he just stood there, looking at me. Looking at the gun in my fist.

In a couple of minutes a horn tooted outside. I put the gun in my pocket and kept my hand on it. "You first," I said.

We walked out and down the hall and out the front door into the darkness, Lomac first, me a couple of steps behind. Everything was in order, I told myself. The guy was scared and he was going

to take me to the joint where Joe Evans was imprisoned. When he got me there, his gorillas might make a play to keep me there, but that was a bridge we hadn't yet reached. The point was, we were on our way.

Yeah. . . .

So he walked down the steps toward the waiting car, and I started after him. And suddenly I was a slice of cheese between two thick slices of bread. Because while I centered my attention on Lomac's chauffeur, reasoning that a certain amount of trouble might emanate from that direction, two lusty lads folded in on me from the flanks and laid hold of me.

They took me under the arms, where it hurts, and both of them shoved guns into my ribs. When Lomac heard my grunt, he turned. The oily smile was back on his face. I couldn't see it because of the darkness, but I could see the gleam of his white teeth and knew he was smiling, and knew the smile was oily.

"Nice work, boys," he said. "Nice timing."

I felt mean, but there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing at all. One of Lomac's lads relieved me of my gun, thumbed out the clip and put the empty weapon back in my pocket.

Lomac said, "Take him over to the club."

They shoved me down the steps, and Lomac stepped aside as we went by. He was grinning. He said something about the average mentality of detectives and I had no come-back. He was right. If I was any example, the average mentality of detectives was low as hell.

The car door was open and they marched me up to it. Lomac tagged along so as not to miss any of the fun. He said, "Maybe you hadn't better take him to the club after all, boys. Just chauffeur him out into the sticks some place and—lose him. You know."

They nodded. One of them climbed into the car. The other pushed me in beside him. Then something happened.

He'd been waiting, I suppose, for me to get into the machine, where I wouldn't be in the way if fireworks developed. At any rate, I was no sooner ensconced in the back seat when the guy stepped out from behind a clump of Lomac's elegant shrubbery and snapped in a voice you could hear for ten miles: "That'll be all of that! You're pinched!"



IT WAS like a thunderclap at a funeral. Lomac jerked around, scared stiff. The gorilla standing beside him acted the way most of those guys do—by instinct. He went for his gun, which, like a damn fool, he'd dropped back into his pocket.

Bill Donahue—it was Bill Donahue—blasted him from a distance of ten yards, and didn't miss. The mugg folded.

Lomac was too scared to move. But the two dogs in the car, the one beside me and the one at the wheel, had no intention of being taken that easily. The one at the wheel said, "Get him, Frankie," and jabbed a foot at the starter button. Frankie shifted sideways and whipped his gun up to the rear window.

Bill Donahue was doing a foolish thing. He was striding toward the car and making a target of himself.

It was up to me. I still had my gun. It was empty but still useful. I grabbed it, and before my pal Frankie knew that I was up to any mischief, he had a face full of gunbutt. I didn't aim. I didn't have time for any aiming. All I did was swing.

Frankie's gun exploded and the bullet went into the upholstery. Frankie sagged. I swung clear of him, in time to toss up my left arm and slap a gun out of the hand of the driver, who whirled to blast me.

We mixed it, hands and elbows doing the work. The car shot across the street, bounced up on the curb and kissed a lamp post. Bill Donahue came running.

But I didn't need Donahue. I may

have been born without brains, but the Lord granted me a fair pair of dukes, and at in-fighting I'm remarkable. In a phone booth I could probably lick Joe Louis.

When Bill Donahue got the door open I was still throwing punches, but the guy wasn't aware of it. He was out, cold. I untangled him and shoved him away from me, and got out.

"Lomac!" I muttered. "He'll get away, Bill!"

Bill shook his head, and I looked across the street and understood. Lomac was sprawled out on his elegant lawn. I hadn't seen Bill bop him, but he certainly wouldn't do any running for a while. I blinked at Bill and said warmly: "You got here just in time." Then I added: "What's the matter?"

He didn't look so good. His face was sort of yellow, as if he were seasick, and he swayed a little on his feet. I remembered that he'd been in a hospital. His heart again.

I grabbed him, but he shook his head, told me he was all right. "It'll pass," he mumbled. "Can't be sick now, Thompson. Too much to do."

I shot a glance at the two guys in the car, to see if they'd be apt to give us any trouble. They wouldn't. Not for quite a time yet. I steered Bill across the street and sat him on the steps of Lomac's mansion. "What brought you here?" I asked.

"The Chief came over to the hospital. Told me what'd happened. I skipped and came over here quick as I could."

"Why? Why here?" I said. "You seem to know a lot about this mess."

He gave me a queer look. "You better find Evans," was all he said.

He was right. I went into the house and used Lomac's phone, called Headquarters. The Chief answered and I told him what was up, where we were at. "You send some men over here to pick up Lomac's gorillas," I begged, "and send a raid gang over to the Dexter Social Club on Dexter Street. I'll be there with Lomac."

He said he would. I went outside and Bill Donahue was bending over the mugg he'd blasted. I got Lomac into my car, but Bill wouldn't come. "I'll stay here and wait for the boys," he said. He still had that queer look on his face, like he was going to be sick, awful sick, and was fighting to stay on his feet until the bell rang.

So with Lomac slumped on the seat beside me, I drove over to Dexter Street, parked at the corner and waited. In a little while the boys arrived.

The Dexter Social Club is a basement joint on the south side of the street, under a hotel. The Dexter Hotel. One is a hangout for thugs, big and small, and the other is a flop-house of the lowest order. I had half a hunch, even when we paraded down the steps and into the club, that we'd wind up in one of the frowsy rooms in the hotel.

As it turned out, I was right. The club was practically deserted. A couple of guys were shooting pool. A couple more were drinking beer out of bottles and watching them. They were all plenty scared when they saw so many uniforms.

We rounded them up and went through the place in search of others, but it was wasted effort. So then we hiked up into the hotel.

A thin little guy at a desk turned white as a sheet when he saw us. He shriveled up and his teeth chattered. I grabbed his necktie. "You know what we want," I said.

"I—I don't!" he wailed.

"No? Well, maybe you don't. Maybe you don't. Who's living here right now?"

He didn't shove the register at me. He had one, but it was a laugh; a guy would be a sap to scribble his name in a dump like that. No. He just let his teeth chatter for a while and then said, "We—we got a guy on the top floor, a sailor, I think he is. And a couple of girls that—that—"

"Work here?" I snapped.

He nodded. "Yes. Work here, sort

of. And then there's two men in 419. That's all."



WE HIKED up the stairs to 419, and went the last few yards along the corridor on the soles of our shoes, making no noise to warn the occupants of that room of our arrival. I had a gun in my right hand and knocked with my left.

A voice said: "Who is it?"

"Lomac," I said.

The door opened. Before the guy even had time to widen his eyes, my foot crunched against his shin. He bent double and ran his chin straight into my fist. The fist knocked him back into the room and he fell with a crash. Even if I do say so myself, that was nice timing.

I barged in, and a flock of uniforms barged in behind me. "Move," I snapped, "and you get it!" They didn't move. It would have been suicide.

There were three of them, and I knew them all. Knew them by name. Shorty Macrae was a greasy, sawed-off monkey with a face as grimy as his record. Tony Partucci was tall, built like a wrestler, and reputed to be dangerous as hell with a gun. The third one, Buddy Carver, was just a tough kid doing his best to graduate into major crime. Three bad babies.

They were reaching for the ceiling, and I motioned a cop forward to frisk them. He did. Then I stood in front of Tony Partucci and snarled, "O. K., where is he?"

He must have known it wouldn't help him any to stall. Or maybe he didn't like the looks of the fist I held ready to tag him with. He jerked his head toward a door on the other side of the room and said, "In there."

I crossed over and jerked the door open. Jojo Evans was inside, bound to the end of an iron bed.

He didn't say anything. Couldn't. His

mouth was smothered under layers of tape. He stared, though, and don't ever let anyone tell you a man can't talk with his eyes. I was as welcome as sunshine after three weeks of rain.

I got him untied and he pulled the tape off his mouth. I would have done that for him, too, but my hands were twitching so hard I probably would have torn away his teeth.

I said, "Lomac's responsible for this. Just wait until I get my hands on that rat!"

Jojo slumped down on the bed and sat there, sucking his lips. He was a sight. His clothes were covered with floor dirt and torn half off him, and his face was a mass of bruises. They'd tossed him around, slugged him, doused him with water to bring him to again. He'd been through hell.

"How'd they get you out of your apartment?" I demanded.

"I thought it was you," Jojo said. "Like a sap I just opened the door."

"They took the pictures?"

He shook his head. "Couldn't find them. That's why I'm not dead yet. They been beating hell out of me, trying to make me tell where to look."

I said, "Where are those pictures?"

"There aren't any."

"What?"

"I mean there aren't any prints. All I did was develop the roll. It's hanging up to dry in the apartment house air-shaft."

I gave him the fishy stare he deserved, and walked into the other room. The boys had cuffs on Lomac's three rats and were ready to herd them out.

"Take 'em to Headquarters," I said. "I'll be over later with Evans and Lomac."

I almost had to carry Jojo down the stairs. He needed a doctor, but I had something else in mind that would do him a lot more good. Mentally, anyway. We piled into my car and I dismissed the cop who was waiting there, guarding Lomac. Lomac was coming to.

I took a roundabout way to Headquar-

ters, a route that led through a couple of nice dark alleys. We spent some time in one of those alleys. When we did reach Headquarters, Jojo felt better. So did I. I slung Lomac over my shoulder and lugged him up the steps, took him into the Chief's private sanctum and dumped him down on a chair. He slid off it and lay in a heap on the floor.

"What the devil happened?" the Chief demanded, looking at him.

"He resisted arrest," I explained.

The Chief said, "Oh."

Later, Jojo and I went over to Jojo's apartment and picked up the roll of film. I held it to a light and looked at it, while Evans stared at me. They were pictures he'd taken in Leon Vanetti's room, with his camera. They showed the corpse hanging there, the fishline, the overturned chair.

It was the chair, of course. I'd been in that room enough times to know it, but sometimes when you're that close to a thing you don't see it. The pictures gave me the proper perspective.

The chair was a mighty long way from the dangling feet of Mr. Leon Vanetti. And it was a heavy hunk of furniture; I knew because I'd hefted it. And no guy with a game leg could ever have kicked it so far out from under him.

I said, "Lomac hangs for this, Jojo. At least he rots in jail for a time. They planned this thing beautifully. Moeller swiped Vanetti's door-key out at Venny Hamlin's place, Monday night. The rest was easy. They just laid for Vanetti and strung him up. Maybe Lomac wasn't on the scene, but he engineered it, and when we put the pressure on those rats who kept you company at the Dexter Hotel, something'll break wide open."

"It would be easier," Jojo declared, if we knew *why* they hung Vanetti."

"I think maybe we'll find that out."

"How?"

"From Bill Donahue. He seems to know plenty about all this."

Bill Donahue wasn't at Headquarters when we got back with the film. He'd

stayed on his feet long enough to superintend the cleaning up at Lomac's house; then he'd collapsed.

Jojo and I drove over to the hospital to see him.

He was in bed and he didn't look too good. We parked beside the bed, and when the nurse went out I said, "Mister, we want to know why Lomac saw fit to rub out Vanetti."

Bill scowled. "Any reason will be good enough for a jury," he said.

"I know that, but just between us we'd like to know the truth. And where you fit into this thing."

Bill handed me a long, quiet stare. "I suppose you know I'm through," he said.

"Hooley! You'll be up and around—"

"Not a chance," Bill declared calmly. "As long as a month ago I knew I was through. I went to a flock of doctors, Thompson, and they all told me the same thing. Bum ticker. Lights out any time. A month at the most."

"You mean it?" I said, feeling queer.

He nodded. "So I decided to raise a little private hell before I turned in my checks. I've been a dick a long time, and I've taken more than my share from crooked politicians and plain rats like Lomac. So I snooped around, Thompson. I snooped and came across a pretty chunk of crime in which Lomac was

sunk up to his greasy neck. You remember that Mason Street underpass?"

I said I remembered it. Why wouldn't I? When the Mason Street underpass caved in—by accident—three workmen died.

"Lomac was the lad who arranged that cave-in," Bill Donahue said quietly, "because he was sore about not getting the contract in the first place. He arranged it, and Vanetti did the dirty work. I dug up positive proof. Not the kind of proof that would convince a jury, but more than enough to convince me. So . . . I planned a curtain call for him. Me, too, I guess."

He hooked his mouth into a smile. To this day, when I go past the cemetery where Bill is buried, I can still see that smile. "So . . . I decided to scare the wits out of Lomac, just for the hell of it, Thompson. I made a few cagey phone calls. I tipped him off that the cops were wise about that underpass cave-in. I figured it would do me a lot of good to see that rat shake in his shoes for a while."

I stared at him. After a while I said, "So he figured he'd be safer with Vanetti out of the way."

"And that," Bill declared, "was the mistake he made."



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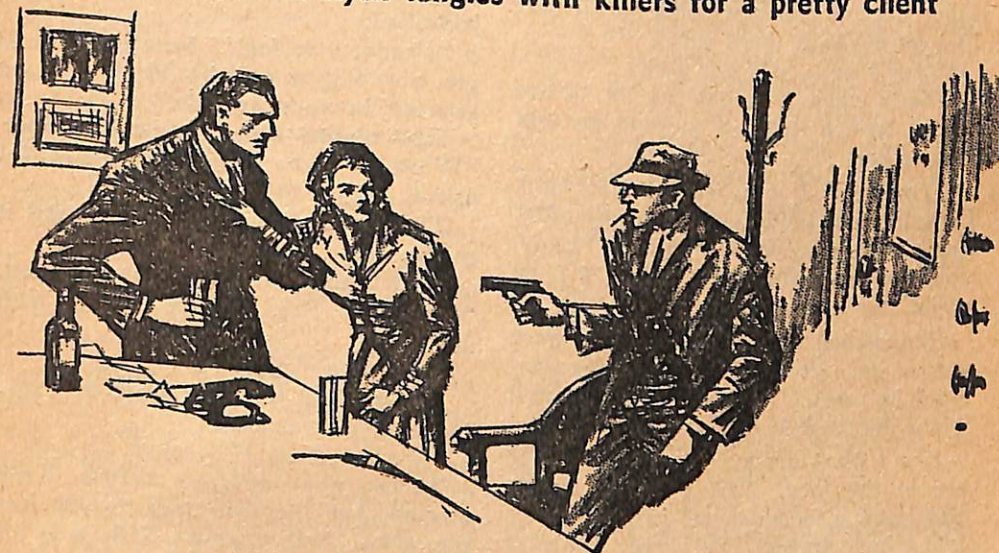
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FIFTY GRAND FRAIL

By ERIC HOWARD

Irish shamus Tim Ryan tangles with killers for a pretty client



HE girl's name was Sullivan, Peggy Sullivan, and if there were ever any prettier members of the Sullivan tribe they would have won all the beauty contests from Dublin to Shanghai. I was for her a hundred per cent even before she spoke, but when I heard her lilting voice, with just a musical hint of old Erin in it, I was lost. I would have bet that she could sing. And she was built for dancing. On top of such qualifications, she had a merry laugh and mischief in her eyes. I can no more resist that combination than I can turn down a thick steak, broiled rare.

If I had known that she was the frail who would lead me into trouble with the cops, get all my friends down on me, and run me into a jam that almost left me on a slab in the morgue, maybe I wouldn't

have fallen. Maybe. My guess is I would have fallen just the same.

She came into my office that crisp October morning like an autumn leaf, dressed in rust-brown that went with her hair.

I was all alone, trying to decide whether to pay another month's rent and carry on or to save my few dollars for eats. I thought I had sewed up a big job as chief investigator for Western Jewelers' Association, but their headman, Gates, had just phoned me the sad news. He was giving the job to an ex-dick named Rufus Sloan. Rufus and I were like a pair of strange bulldogs. Rufus beat me out because the cops gave him a stronger recommendation than they gave me. Rufus knew how to play ball, and on a couple of occasions the cops had taken a strange dislike to me.

I was washed up. The smart thing would be to close up the alleged office and leave town. There were two or three

burgs where agencies would put me to work.

Then in walked Peggy. A girl to put new heart in a man.

"Hello. Is anybody here?" she asked.

I got up and ran my hand over my hair. I wished I had been wearing my other suit and that new polka-dot tie that had set me back three bucks.

"May I come in?" she said.

That's when I caught the lilt in her voice. Before that, all I could do was look at her.

"You bet!" I said, when I recovered. Girls like her didn't come into my office more than once in a lifetime. "Lady, you can not only come in, but I hope you'll stay a long while."

She opened her eyes wide—they were sort of gray-green—and I saw the mischief in them. Then she laughed, and when she laughed that was something.

She looked around the office. I got red in the face. This girl was smart. She knew a lot about me just from taking a look around. She knew I wasn't making any dough, that the janitor of the building wasn't taking good care of my place, that I was on the way out. She probably figured that I was an ambitious guy who thought he could go places with his own two-bit agency.

She saw the bottle on my desk and smiled.

I touched it tentatively. "Would you —" I began.

"Seeing it's a good Irish brand, I would!" she said.

I got a clean glass, poured one for her, one for me.

"Here's luck!" she said.

"Thanks. I need it. Down the hatch."

Down it went and she didn't even make a face.

"You're Timothy Ryan, detective?" she asked.

"I am," I said.

"Well, then, you're the very man I want to see."

"Just a moment, please. How did you happen to choose me?"

"Oh, I ran my finger down the list in the telephone book until I came to a name I liked. I'm Peggy Sullivan and I—"

She didn't go on. Someone else had come in. She heard him, turned and gasped. He was a little guy, young, thin, wiry, with a face older than he should have had.

"Peggy, you fool!" he said. "I told you not to go to a dick! You'll only get yourself in worse trouble."

I got up and walked toward the door. "What do you want here, feller?" I asked. "Miss Sullivan and I—"

The guy pulled a gat and shoved it at me.

"Get back, shamus!" he snapped. "Come on, Peg. You're coming with me."

"Pete don't! Please!"

The girl had jumped toward him, trying to step between us.

"Hit him, Kelly!" I yelled.

There was nobody named Kelly around, but the thin guy swung just the same. And it wasn't Kelly who hit him; it was Timothy Ryan, in person. Right under the ear. He went down and stayed. No credit to me. When a hundred and ninety pounds of beef hits a hundred and ten pounds of skin and bones, something like that has to happen. I took his gun and left him on the floor. I locked the outer door.

"Now, Miss Sullivan," I said, "we can continue our little talk."

"I—I guess I'd better not," she said, looking down at Pete. "No. It would just make more trouble. I shouldn't have come here. He told me—"

"Never mind what he says or the likes of him," I told her. "I'm in it now, trouble or no trouble. Whether you want me to help you or not, little Pete is going to try to get back at me in some dark alley some night. So—"

"Oh!" she said.

"Never mind that. I'm used to it. Just tell me."

Well, she did. And if it hadn't been Peggy Sullivan telling it, I wouldn't have

believed a word of it. But with her saying it, it had to be true. First of all, Gus Markey had died a week ago in his suite at the Hotel Imperial. I knew that; everybody knew it; the papers had been full of it. Peggy worked at the cigar stand in the hotel; she had known Gus well.

Gus was a gambler and a lot of other things. He had a private mint. He'd lived in the hotel quite a while. A lot of people might have wanted Gus to die, but he fooled them and died a natural death—of pneumonia.

When he was sinking, Gus sent one of his boys down to Peggy and asked her to come up. She went. He wanted to see her alone. His doctor and nurse and body-guard went out.

"You're a good kid, Peggy, and I like you," Gus told her. "You're all right. I've got something for you." He fished into the mattress cover on his bed and pulled out a flat leather case. "There's fifty grand in here, sis," he said, "and I don't want a lot of punks killing each other for it. You take it. Stick it in a bank. Do anything you want with it. Nobody will know you've got it and it's all yours. If you don't spend it all in one place, it'll last a while. That's all, babe. Dough never did me any good. Maybe you can get some fun out of it."

Peggy had been afraid to take it. He insisted. Finally, she took the leather case and left him. At noon she went down to the big bank on the corner, rented a safe deposit box and put the case in it. Yes, she had looked. The fifty grand was in it. Somebody must have seen her going into the bank. Gus had a lot of visitors that afternoon and he died that night.

Guys continued to go to his rooms, where his body-guard was staying until the lease expired, and they practically pulled the furniture apart, looking for something. It wasn't there. Peggy had it.

Then this guy she called Pete stepped into the picture. She had known Pete

Blinker almost all her life; they had lived in the same block as kids. She hadn't seen him lately. She knew he had served a one-year term for snatching an old lady's handbag and that he was generally no good; she had heard that he was working for a bookie. He told her he had been working for Gus.

Pete and his friends had it all figured out. Gus had passed the dough to Peggy—they had checked all other possibilities—and she had been spotted in the bank. More than that, they had seen the key to her safe deposit box. Pete's suggestion—he told her he was just passing it on from the boss—was that she should get the dough out of the box and hand it over. She could take a grand cut herself—one grand, no more. If she didn't—well, a lot of things could happen. And would.

They had probably been surprised. Peggy Sullivan wouldn't hand over the jack, not even for one grand and safety. She would keep it, as Gus had asked her to, or she would see that it was returned to its rightful owner, if Gus had got it by robbery or fraud. But she would not—and her eyes flashed when she told me—hand it over to a gang of thugs!

Then things had happened. A guy had talked rough to her, at the stand, and she had slapped his face. The manager of the hotel saw it and fired her. She had been living in the hotel and sticking close to her room when not on duty. She had to move.

She went into an apartment with a girl friend, and after that they were both subjected to all sorts of annoyances—even their clothes were doused with crude oil and ruined. Peggy couldn't let her friend be treated that way—she was afraid they might do something to the other girl—and had moved into a furnished room.

The annoyances started all over again—telephone calls that awakened her landlady in the middle of the night, lies about Peggy, men coming around at all hours. The landlady had asked her to

move. Peggy decided she had enough.

That's when she had run her finger down the list of so-called detectives in the phone book and had picked me.

"The simplest thing to do," I said, "would be to take out your grand and hand over the rest of it."

She was on her feet right away. "I will not!" she said. "They're not going to make me. And if that's the best you can do—"

"Sh!" I said. "I didn't say it was the best, just the simplest. These muggs mean business. They're just playing, so far. When they really get rough, what then?"

"I don't know," she said. "That's why I came to you. I didn't go to the police because—well, I was afraid they wouldn't believe me and they might make a scandal of it and people would be asking what was I to Gus Markey and all that. Well, I was just the girl who sold him cigars with a smile. And besides, I thought the police might impound the money or whatever you call it."

"Yeah," I said, "they might. They might do worse than that. Well, I'll throw little Pete out the window and then we can go somewhere. I know a place—"

Somebody was pounding on the door.

"—but I don't think they'll let us get there," I finished. "You wait."

I glanced at Pete. He was still out. I closed the door in the partition between my office and where my secretary would have been, if I had had one, and went to the hall door.

"What do you want?" I said.

"Open up, shamus," a hard guy said. "I'm tired of waiting for Pete and the doll. I'll settle this right now."

"Is that a fact? Suppose I don't open up, pal?"

"I'll kick the door down—and don't think I can't."

"Oh, I wouldn't put you to all that trouble," I drawled. "I'll let you in."

I snapped the lock and stepped back as he crashed in. I had my hand on my

gun in my pocket, but it didn't do any good. All I saw was a big guy, wearing a dark suit and a black hat, and something sailing through the air at me. I ducked and it went over my head. I heard Peggy scream as the partition split wide open. Ducking and slipping gave the big guy plenty of time. He swung his right hand, and I couldn't get out of the way; and his gun caught me on the side of the head.



WHEN I came out of it, I saw what the big guy had thrown at me—a mop-pail with a wringer attachment on it that the janitor must have left in the hall. Peggy was gone, but Pete was still there on the floor. Only there was something funny about him.

When I looked at him again, I saw what it was. Pete was dead, with a bullet hole in his head. The big guy had got tired of waiting, all right. Maybe Pete had told him he could bring Peggy around, for a split of the take. But the big guy was through fooling. He wanted fifty grand. Or maybe little Pete, seeing Peggy treated rough, had gone noble and had tried to stop his pal. Whatever it was, Pete was plenty dead.

And I had to report it to Inspector Joe X. Swayne, a guy who would be very happy to hang a rap on me.

No, I didn't, either. Because while I was getting up and staggering around, I heard a siren and in a minute the cops were in.

Joe X., in person, looking meaner than the last time I had seen him. Joe was tall and lean and white-haired; he had a nasty way of talking.

"So now you've killed a guy," he said to me.

"Yeah," I snarled back. "In my sleep. While I was unconscious, I dreamed I had a gun in my hand and I popped this fellow. Know him?"

"Why wouldn't I know him? I've

arrested him a dozen times. But just because he was a lousy little crook doesn't give you the right to bump him."

"Listen, stupid. I was in here talking to a client and—"

"He's got a client, boys," Joe said sarcastically.

"—and this guy came in. He started getting rough and I hit him. Knocked him over. Then I went on talking with my client. We were just going out, when another guy—a big one—crashed in. He threw the mop-pail at me and hit me over the head. Feel this bump! I was out for quite a while. When I came back, the little guy was dead, the big guy was gone—and so was my client."

"And who was your client?" Joe asked.

"That's none of your business," I said. "And now I'm going out to see if I can find the big guy."

"Suppose I take you downtown?"

"What good will that do you? Listen, Joe, be smart. You want the big guy for murder. I'll help you get him. I want him because he's getting tough with my client. I'll play ball with you."

"I know how you play," he growled.

His men went over the place. They took a look at my gun, saw it hadn't been fired. They felt the bump on my head, sized up the mop-pail destruction, and so on. Finally, Joe X. got the janitor in. He was the one who had called the cops. He said he had seen the big guy in the hall, near my door. He had heard the shot—he was down in the basement and had come up the back stairs—and when he opened the door, I was lying on the floor, out, and so was Pete. Joe X. shrugged.

"O. K.," he said. "You can go. But don't think we can't pick you up. Now who's your client?"

I was through the door. "You guess," I said, and ducked.

Finding the big guy was not going to be a cinch. All I had to go on was that he had been close enough to Gus to have a claim on the fifty grand and he had

known Pete. I hadn't even got a look at him. All I knew was that he was big and dressed in dark clothes. I'd know his voice, though, if I caught up to him. Meanwhile, he had Peggy and he would try every way he knew to get her to give up the dough. I knew where I could pick up a few rats who had trailed along with Gus. I might learn something.

I headed for a poolroom, not far from the Imperial, where one of Gus's boys made a book. The first guy I saw when I walked in was my old pal, Rufus Sloan, who had done me out of that job with the Western Jewelers'.

"Nice dumps you play around in, big shot," I said.

Sloan was a big, red-headed guy with a freckled face and a temper to match.

"Get out of my way, louse," he said.

"I'm working."

"This is my side of the street, big boy. I stay here. Go peddle your papers. And, speaking of lice, there's one dirty member of that species that did me out of a swell job. Like the elephant, Tim Ryan remembers."

Rufus swung at me—a wide one. I got under it and inside. I jolted one up to his jaw. While he was rocking on his heels, before he could get his thick arms around me, I jumped back.

My mistake. Something hard jabbed into me, and a tough-voiced lad said, "Take it easy. Walk out the side door. Move! Stay out of this, Sloan. This guy belongs to me."

Sloan stepped back against the wall, his mouth open, rubbing his jaw. Then he began to laugh.

"Take him, Dutch. It's jake with me. Take him for a long, one-way ride. I don't like him in my scenery."

"What you don't like, don't count, see?" the guy said. "Keep your big trap shut or you'll take a ride yourself."

Sloan sobered quickly. "Okey, Dutch, okey. It ain't my funeral."

"It could be," Dutch said, and there was plenty of meaning in it.

I was moving to the side door. There

was no one in the way. Nobody was paying any attention to us. Dutch had his gun in his coat pocket, but he kept prodding me with it.

I had him now. He was Dutch Schiller, an out-of-town boy who was wanted lots of places. And if half of what they said about him was half true, he was bad. Not a guy to fool with.

We got outside. There was a car at the curb. The motor was purring smoothly. A man was at the wheel, another standing on the curb.

"Get in," Dutch said.

The fellow on the curb went over me with big paws. He took my gun and shoved me into the back. Dutch got in, too.

"Let's go," he said.

We went a few blocks, circled one, drove into a driveway beside a big old house that had 'Furnished Room' signs in front. They told me to get out of the car and walk to the back door. I did. We all piled into a big, old-fashioned kitchen. There was a woman at the stove, a big blonde who had been a looker in her day, a long time ago.

"Well, well," she said. "What am I running here, a boy's dormitory?"

"Where's Jack?" Dutch said.

The dame pointed with a long fork. "In there, eating as usual."

Dutch pushed open a swinging door. At a table in the next room I saw a big guy, dressed in a dark suit, inhaling spaghetti and washing it down with red ink. It was the one who had busted into my office.

"My pal!" I said. "Hey, Jack, remember me?"

He gave me a dirty look as the door swung shut. The two guys beside me told me to shut up. I ignored them and looked at the dame.

"Haven't I met you somewhere, baby?" I asked her.

"Listen at the guy!" the dame said. "He's on the make."

"Bring the shamus in here," the big guy said.

I winked at the dame and the two mugs pushed me through the door. Dutch was sitting at the table. The big guy, Jack, had pushed his chair back.

"Sit down," he said. "I want to talk to you, Ryan. Got a little proposition to make."



HE WAS a horse-faced guy, with a dark skin, two gold teeth in the front of his mouth. He had off-color gray eyes and a long, thin nose. He waved the two tough babies out of the room.

I was trying to place him. He wasn't a local boy; he wasn't one of Gus's pals. He had probably come here with Dutch; from the looks of things, Dutch was working for him, taking orders and liking it. Jack was the brains of the outfit.

He lit up a long, thin, black cigar.

"You going to listen to reason, Ryan?" he asked.

"Let's hear the proposition," I said.

"A smart guy hi-jacked fifty grand off a couple of my boys, right after they did a nice, sweet job taking it away from a bank messenger."

"Oh," I said, "so that's where it came from. From the First National stick-up."

"Yeah," he nodded. "That's where it came from. And it went to Gus. One of my boys got shot up trying to hang on to the dough. Gus got sick right away, and it's lucky for him he died, because pneumonia bugs are painless compared to what we'd have given him. Gus passed the dough to a dame. You know her."

"Sure. And she put it right back in the First National. Where it belongs."

"It belongs here," he said, and slapped his pocket. "We need it, brother. We've got to have it, quick. And you're going to help us get it."

I shook my head. Dutch growled

something; Jack held up his hand for silence.

"We offered the dame a grand," he said. "That's a nice commission. That's the best we'll do. You can split the grand between you. And, besides, I can do something for you. You wanted a job with Gates of the Jewelers' Association and you didn't get it. Sloan got it. Well, I can give you some dope on Sloan and a jewelry racket that will make you ace-high with Gates. You better use your head and take what you can get."

"There was a dead guy in my office," I said. "Name of Pete Blinker. When the cops find dead guys, they get mean. If you hadn't killed Pete—"

"I didn't kill him," Jack said. "You're nuts. When I left there, he was out on the floor, but he was alive. Maybe I should have killed him; he was trying a double-cross, telling me he could bring Gus's frail to time, telling Gus's boys the same thing."

"Don't call Peggy his frail or I'll knock your teeth out!"

I made a jump for him, but Dutch clipped me on the jaw.

"Sit down!" he said.

Jack grinned at me. "Pete called her his frail," he said evenly. "And why do you think Gus passed her that dough?"

"Why fool around?" Dutch wanted to know. "We got to get out of here, Jack. The burg is hot. Let's take the shamus up and work 'em both over."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Finish your proposition, Jack."

"Okey. You talk sense to the twist. Get her to agree. You go to the bank with her, with a couple of my boys, and open the box. Take out a grand, hand the rest over. Give us some time. Play ball and I'll give you the dope on Sloan—after we leave. It's a nice deal, Ryan. Better take it."

"Yeah," I said. "Good business. But where do you get the idea I could convince Peggy? And do you know what the cops could do to me? Hook me as a party to the First National job."

Jack shrugged. His off-color eyes went frosty. "It's a proposition you've got to take up, pal. You don't want to see the twist hurt; you don't want to get hurt."

I laughed at him. "A lot of good that would do you—with the dough locked up in the bank."

"Take him up, Dutch," Jack said, and his voice was like a steel file on rusty metal.

I was marched up the smelly old stairs, turned down the hall to a rear room and shoved into it. Peggy was there, lying on her side on a studio couch, ankles tied, hands tied, adhesive tape across her lips. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright with indignation. But when she saw me, moisture came into her them—tears of pity, I guessed. I tried to give her a smile, but it wasn't much of a success.

"Talk to her," Dutch said. "Tell her what we want—what you'll both get if you don't come across."

I pulled a chair over beside her and sat down. I told her. Gave it to her just as Jack and Dutch wanted me to. Then, as her eyes were asking me for my advice and opinion, I added: "But as long as the dough's in the bank and nobody can get it out but you, a lot of good it will do them to get tough."

Her eyes smiled at me. She was for holding out. I thought she would be. I sighed. We were going to take some punishment.

The blond dame from the kitchen came in, with Jack. The dame began to take off Peggy's shoes. Jack took out a packet of matches. I got the idea.

"Hey, wait!" I begged. "Don't do that. Listen, you can't burn her feet!"

"Why not?" Dutch snarled. "Why the hell can't we? She's holdin' out, ain't she? We got to get out of here! This burg's hot! For fifty grand—"

"Shut up, Dutch," Jack said. "I made you a proposition, shamus. It's up to

you and the twist. The dough is ours and we need it."

"Burning her won't get it!"

"Then we'll try burning you. She's your doll, isn't she? She was just playing Gus for what she could get, but she's your doll. When you begin to smell like a piece of charred steak, maybe—" He broke off and swung around to Peggy. "Listen, toots, I don't want to hurt you. All I want is what belongs to me. You ready to talk business?"

I was hot all over. Peggy looked at me and I nodded. Her eyes told me she was ashamed of me and sorry for me, too.

But we'd both be better off out of this house, on the way to the bank or in the bank. I had my hands burned once and whenever I think of it I go to pieces. The idea of watching them burn Peggy had me jittery.

But Peggy, no matter what she thought of me, nodded her head, too. She was ready to talk business.

Jack bent over her, ripped off the adhesive tape. It hurt and Peggy made a little noise.

"Now don't start yelling," Jack said, "or you'll be taped up again. You're ready to go to the bank and turn over the dough? Talk fast, sister!"

"Better do it," I said. "These two men are desperate. We can't fight them. No use taking a lot of punishment for a cold-blooded bank—and the bank would get the money, sooner or later, if these guys didn't. It's money they stole from the bank and Gus got it by hijacking them."

"Yes," Peggy said. "I'll go. I'll give it to you."

"Fine," Jack said. "Now we'll do it this way. We'll hold Ryan here till the boys come back with the dough. If you don't do your part, sister, your pal Ryan gets his. And if you make any funny passes, in the bank or on the way, it'll be too bad for you—and Ryan, too. So think it over."

"Hey!" I objected. "The proposition was I would go to the bank, too."

"You didn't take me up," Jack said. "We'll do it this way. Maybe the twist don't care what happens to you. Maybe she does. I think she does. So with you here we'll be sure she goes through in a nice way."

"Why should she care what happens to me? She just met me today. You're nuts. And the guy that croaked Pete Blinker—if you didn't—is looking for you. Or else why would he shoot Pete?"

That was the first Peggy had heard of Pete's death. She gasped and moaned a little. Not that she cared much about Pete, maybe, but she had known him a long time.

I was just stalling, hoping they'd let me go along. Outside, even at the bank, I might have a chance; in this house I didn't have any.

Jack looked thoughtful, frowned, rubbed his chin.

"Who killed Pete if you didn't?" I pushed him. "Joe X. Swayne will want to know. He'll find out, too. You think you're tough, fella; but Joe X. is a lot tougher. He'll pin a murder rap on you, besides the First National job. You may get the fifty grand, but you won't get out of town with it."

Dutch took a swing at me. I ducked. "Let's get going," Dutch said. "We got to get out of this burg."

"Wait," Jack told him. "There's something in what the shamus says. Swayne is a tough cop. But he's a Homicide guy. He ain't interested in the First National haul. The cops have almost forgotten that anyway; we didn't leave 'em anything to work on. But the bankers' association dicks are on the job. So are Gus's boys. Let me figure this out. Pete was crossing us, dealing with Gus's pals. Maybe crossing them and dealing with others. The damned little stoolie!"

"Sure," I said, "he was a stool for the cops—and for the association dicks, too."

Jack gave me a long look. Back of the hard look in his eyes you could see

he was nervous, worried. He had to get the dough for a clean getaway. He was hunted and worried. If he didn't get away soon, with a stake to last him a long time in his hide-out, somebody would get him—Joe X., the association dicks, Gus's pals. He was the fox and they were the hounds. They'd get him. He knew it, and that knowledge was burning him.

"I got it," he said, and turned to the big blonde. "Mamie, they don't know you here. You just run this house. Nobody's looking for you. You're going to the bank with the doll. Spink will drive you—they don't know him, either. She passes you the dough, you come back here. Then we all take a powder, leaving the doll and the shamus in here. Go ahead, Mamie, and take your thirty-eight."

He swung around to Peggy. "You'll get hurt, sister, if you don't play nice. And this guy, Ryan, will get worse than that."

JACK switched on a little radio, dialed through a lot of swing and got a news broadcast. Joe X., the louse, had given it out that Pete had been killed in my office, that I had disappeared and the police were looking for me. What a pal! The idea was that I had croaked Pete and taken a powder.

Joe X. didn't care what he did to my rep. He'd give out anything that he thought might help to turn up the guy he wanted.

I heard the car glide out of the driveway. Peggy and Mamie were on their way to the bank.

Jack beckoned to Dutch and whispered to him. I strained my ears, but all I could get was "... pick up—the dirty so-and-so." Dutch went out.

"Who you having picked up?" I asked. "The guy that killed Pete," he said. "I'm going to make Joe X. a present—give him the guy all trussed up and ready to hang."

"Who is he?"

He didn't answer me.

"You think you're going to get out of town?" I went on. "How? And where can you go? Man, there's no hide-out in the whole country good enough to keep you safe from the cops, the association dicks and Gus's boys. You're sunk, Jack. You haven't a chance in the world."

That made him mad. He began cussing me. He moved toward me, with his gun in his mitt. He was swinging it like he intended to knock me cold. I didn't want to be knocked cold again.

I pulled back, away from him. "Don't, Jack," I begged. "Take it easy."

"Then keep your trap shut!" he snarled, and swung away.

I was waiting for that. The mugg thought I was scared. I jumped and put the bee on him—arm around his neck, my knee against his back, my other hand on his gun wrist. He was powerful and he was fighting hard, but I was cutting off his wind. I was bending him back. I had disarmed plenty of muggs this way. But Jack was stronger than any of the others.

He was trying to free his gun hand, twist it around on me. I hung on and put extra pressure on his Adam's apple. The guy could take a lot, but not all I gave him. When he began to gurgle, I let go of his wrist, swung one to his jaw. He slipped and I let him hit the floor, grabbing his wrist with both hands, twisting the gun out of his mitt.

A kick in the skull put him away.

I tied him with the rope they had taken off Peggy, slapped the used adhesive tape across his mouth.

I started down. Dutch must have heard the fall of Jack's big hulk. He was waiting for me in a doorway. He started shooting. A slug cut into my left arm. I dropped behind the railing, angled a shot down at him. It cut a red gash across the top and side of his head. Then there wasn't any more shooting.

I waited quite a while. No sounds. Nobody around. Nobody running out.

I started down, my left arm dragging and bleeding a lot. I poked into rooms. The house was empty.

There was a phone in the kitchen and I dialed a familiar number—headquarters. I got Joe X.

It seemed no time at all before the cops were in. They came in quietly, leaving their cars on a back street.

"You louse!" I told Joe X. "Making out I'm a killer and that I ran away from you cops!"

He grinned at me. "Just detective work, shamus, just detective work! Now tell me."

"I do the detective work!" I said. "O. K.! They're picking up the guy that shot Pete, bringing him here. They'll be here soon. You guys duck down and nab 'em when they come."

"Who is he?"

"How the hell do I know?" I growled. "But Jack knows. He sent for him. I got Jack all tied up, upstairs. He pulled the First National job, with Dutch Schiller. Dutch is in the hall—and he'll never stick up another bank. Now duck and wait for these mobsters to toss a killer in your lap."

We didn't have to wait long. About ten minutes. The car that had brought me here swung into the drive, entered the garage. There were three cops in there and they covered the three men in the car from all sides. They brought them into the house, the two I had seen before carrying the third.

And the third, who had been knocked out, was none other than my old pal, Rufus Sloan!

"There's your man," I told Joe X. "Jack says he's been running a jewelry racket. Pete must have known about it and tried to shake him down. Maybe Sloan was trying to cut in on this First National dough, too. Anyway, there's no doubt he wanted to get rid of Pete, and finding him out in my office was too good an opportunity to pass up. So he

bumped Pete in my place, hoping you'd be dumb enough to pin it on me. You can make Jack talk and Sloan, too, if you know how. And you cops recommended him to Gates!"

I drew a long breath and went on.

"Now listen! There'll be another car coming here. They're bringing fifty grand from the bank for Jack—the First National haul. There'll be two women in it and a man driving. You mutts nab the man and the old dame—a washed-out blonde. But if you touch the young girl, I'll shoot hell out of you! She's my client!"

The other car, a coupé, slid into the drive a few minutes later. A slim, dapper little crook got out from behind the wheel. Mamie, hanging on to Peggy's arm, got out and pulled the girl after her. Mamie had a leather case under her arm. They got to the back door and then Joe X.'s boys rammed guns in their backs. But not in Peggy's. As she let out a cry and backed away, frightened, I caught her in my good arm.

Mamie put her hands up and the leather case, full of five hundred dollar bills, went up in the air, flew open—and the money sailed and floated around us.

Joe X. called one of the dicks.

"Take this crazy shamus to the hospital," he said, "before his arm gets so bad they'll have to cut it off. From the looks of it, he's going to need both arms. Take the girl along if she wants to go."

"You know what, Peg o' my heart," I said. "We ought to go somewhere and get acquainted. Not a bad idea, eh?"

"Not bad at all," she agreed.

So, as it turned out, the First National gave us five grand for nabbing Jack and Dutch; and old Gates practically begged me to take the job he had given Sloan. On account Sloan was locked up for murder, and not much use to Gates. Just to oblige the old guy, I took the job, but held out for more dough than before. Because maybe two can live as cheap as one, but I don't think so.

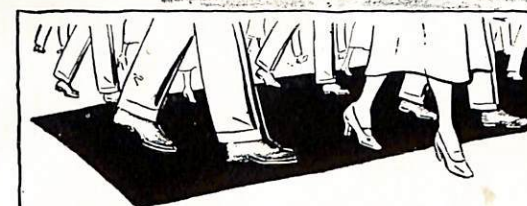
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